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Crowdsourcing COVID-19: A brief analysis of librarian posts on Reddit

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1 Introduction

At first, most of the world believed that coronavirus disease (COVID-19) would be a passing illness (O’Donnell, 2020). It was then learned that it spread globally and would wreak havoc for months (BBC, 2020). Among the repercussions of this pandemic were travel delays, misinformation in the news, and a realization that social distancing was needed to decrease the spread. As the world slowly shut down, essential workers (such as grocery store workers and government personnel) wondered if safety precautions would be taken to protect them.

Library workers are among those affected by the changes introduced by COVID-19 (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 2020). Library workers must balance risks against offering vital information services needed by patrons to communicate and access essential data. Some people found the library superfluous before the pandemic (Denning, 2015). Then as the pandemic continued, the need for libraries has been highlighted (Kirchner, 2020). There are children out of school who need Internet access, and adults find that they can no longer support themselves because they have been laid off from work. They cannot afford entertainment or Internet access. Some homeless individuals need a place to go and rely on the library as a safe haven. Hence, libraries have again shown themselves to be pillars of society for their educational and social worth (Rosen, 2020).

2 Literature review

The corpus of research examining the COVID-19 response of libraries is growing. A few researchers have provided insight into library responses. Notably, Erich (2020) studied how libraries in Romania reacted and adapted to the pandemic. Websites and Facebook pages of libraries were analyzed to determine the activities used to provide notification of services to the public. The results indicated that many libraries assumed the primary role of sharing information about the pandemic for credible sources. County libraries often reported information for local governments while university libraries disseminated scientific resources. Moreover, libraries adapted how their services were implemented by offering access to digital library materials and
virtual displays. While some libraries only provided access to databases onsite, others provided access to periodicals and databases online. The libraries’ online activities included online readings, psychotherapy, classes, and virtual tours (Erich, 2020, p. 341).

Oyelude (2020) notes that libraries played a critical role in disseminating creditable resources during the pandemic. The library community has adapted its regular practices for access and professional engagement because of the pandemic. For instance, Oyelude (2020) has explained how conferences were canceled or moved online. The American Library Association has responded by sharing free online resources. One such resource is Booklist, which offers collection development and readers’ advisory tools. The Public Library Association has been offering free on-demand recordings related to digital equity and the pandemic. Another organization, HathiTrust, partnered with academic libraries to provide temporary access to its digital library (HathiTrust Digital Library, 2020). Finally, Oyelude noted that companies with Web 2.0 tools like BrainPOP, Kahoot!, and Pear Deck were offering free access to assist with helping school communities.

While Oyelude (2020) described how libraries offered digital services in general, Ali and Gatiti (2020) focused on the academic librarian’s role. They identified three dimensions of the role, including:

1. Sharing public health information for preventing the spread of the virus,
2. Supporting research teams and researchers by providing creditable information,
3. Supporting the fundamental needs of library users.

Ali and Gatiti (2020) further identified how librarians could help the public within these roles. For example, social distancing was clarified as a way to prevent the spread of the virus. Library users needed to know that research was used to draw this conclusion. Hence, they asserted that librarians and other experts could use social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram to counteract misinformation. Similarly, librarians can use database resources to provide researchers and their teams with the most up-to-date literature regarding COVID-19. Finally, as Oyelude (2020) and Erich (2020) mentioned, library users continue to need the library support that was available to them before the pandemic. Therefore, it is essential to offer document delivery, reference interviews, and other research support accessible prepandemic through virtual means.

Jaeger and Blaabaek (2020) discussed the learning inequities brought forth by the epidemic in Denmark. As with other countries such as the United States, schools were forced to close for social distancing and parents were forced to home educate their children. Jaeger and Blaabaek (2020) cited Andrew et al. (2020) and Bol (2020) when asserting that parents with more education and income can provide more resources, which include homework help and support materials such as digital devices to facilitate their children’s educational needs. For that reason, it can be concluded that children with parents of lower socioeconomic status (SES) have received less assistance during the pandemic.

Jaeger and Blaabaek (2020, paragraph 2) utilized public library records for 55 million observations of family library daily checkouts to further examine the disparities in learning opportunities during the pandemic. The results show that socioeconomic
variables such as parents’ education and income were related to the number of children’s books borrowed from public libraries. The researchers observed that children from families with higher SESs checked out more books before the pandemic started. When the pandemic started, the gap between books checked out by families from higher and lower SESs increased, with families from lower SESs checking out fewer books. Thus, the pandemic intensified the disparities that are experienced related to educational resources.

This brief literature review has outlined some ways that librarians are addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. Libraries have adapted their services, with many offering blended and digital activities. Companies and organizations have responded to libraries’ need to modify services by granting free access to their resources. While numerous libraries have addressed the pandemic by reworking their services, families with higher SESs are more adept at utilizing library services. Furthermore, the research indicates that digital services are not as effective as they could be because the digital divide compounds the gaps in library usage.

3 Problem statement

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a global catastrophe. Initially, it was compared to the flu, and health professionals believed that it would pass (O’Donnell, 2020). The evolving responses to the virus left governments and university and library leaders pondering how best to handle public services. Libraries were caught in a precarious position as their services are essential, yet gathering in libraries and sharing materials can spread the virus. Based on these factors, this study examines how librarians reacted to the COVID-19 virus using posts in the social media platform Reddit. The questions that guide this investigation include:

1. Based on the posts retrieved by using RedditExtractoR, what COVID-19 pandemic topics were most discussed?
2. Based on the most popular posts retrieved by RedditExtractoR, what strategies did librarians believe were effective for coping with the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. Based on the most popular posts retrieved by RedditExtractoR, what questions did librarians have about coping with the COVID-19 pandemic?

4 Data collection

Woodfield et al. (2013) list some of the benefits of using social media for data collection. According to these authors, social media allows researchers to collect massive amounts of data unobtrusively. Hence, researchers do not need to rely on self-reporting. Instead, they can see interactions in a natural state without worrying about whether the respondent has changed their behaviour to report their responses. Subsequently, retrieving data in its most natural form improves the reliability of the data. Also, there is less bias introduced into the data collection because the researcher collects data
A limitation of collecting social media is the restrictions placed on data collection by social media platforms. Reddit limits data collection with its API to 500 comments per thread (Rivera, 2019). It is possible that by using the AI offered by a platform, not all posts will be retrieved. Social media websites frequently use algorithms. A post in Reddit can be buried within the website if it is not commented on or upvoted (liked) by Reddit community participants. Two individuals mining data at the same time may collect entirely different datasets.

There are some ethical considerations for using social media for research. For example, it can be concluded that information openly posted online is public information. On the contrary, some people tend to post information online that can be detrimental to their offline lives. Posters might not post with the intent to have their words used for research. Consequently, it is important to protect the identity of posters by aggregating data and not using usernames, just as one would do if they were writing a report based on traditional means of data collection.

The package RedditExtractoR is described as a “collection of tools for extracting structured data from https://www.reddit.com/” (Rivera, 2019). The pack was used to scrape comments from the subreddit r/Libraries for the term COVID-19. The query was set to be limited to original posts that received at least five comments for this study. By using this approach, 1497 results were retrieved. Next, the researcher removed all references to questions and comments related to advising for completing librarianship studies. After this step, 500 posts remained. The remaining posts were then narrowed down to the comments related to the five most popular original posts, as indicated by the post’s number of comments. Narrowing down the comments left the 323 posts that were analyzed for this study.

Posts that were collected using the Reddit API through RedditExtractoR returned comments written between March 9, 2020, and October 20, 2020. The usernames, locations of commenters, and titles of posts and comments were not directly quoted to protect the community participants. After the posts were collected, the top five posts retrieved with RedditExtractoR were analyzed for questions, and the comments were analyzed based on the research questions. The result for Research Question 1 was derived by looking at the total counts for responses to the posts that were retrieved. Research Question 2 was analyzed by reading the posts related to each original comment, coding them, and grouping them into themes using a grounded theory approach (Benaquisto, 2008). The answer for Research Question 3 was found by reading each post and listing the questions that were asked.

5 Findings

1. Research Question 1

Research Question 1 was designed to learn about the topics that were most important to the librarians communicating on the Reddit platform. The following represents the original comments with the most posts.
Libraries open during the COVID pandemic (107 comments). This post was essentially a roll call. The original poster wanted to know how many librarians were still going to work after their libraries were closed to the public. The responses varied with most librarians indicating that they were still at work. Posters debated the need to be closed for various reasons. First, some people needed to work to have their health care. Others felt it was important to serve their populations. By reading the posts, it was clear that librarians are aware of the populations they serve. While some populations can go without services, others will be heavily impacted. The librarians noted that libraries are frequently used as childcare services. In some areas, school-aged students were encouraged to go to the library when their schools closed.

Similarly, during the summer, school-aged children flood libraries for services. Librarians were hoping for a domino effect where schools closed, and children and their guardians were encouraged to stay home to stop the virus spread. Some librarians were desperate enough to want to quit their jobs. The need for health care stopped some from leaving their jobs. Others found safer employment options. The librarians who posted were not sure what they should do. They were conflicted because they wanted to stop offering face-to-face programming, but library services were critical for children who needed access to computers and reading materials.

Telecommuting during the pandemic (67 comments). In this thread, the original poster noted librarians could work from home. Nonetheless, like the “Libraries open during the COVID pandemic” post, librarians in some locations must still go to work in a building that is not accessible to the public. The original poster requested insight on how libraries are handling “work from home” agreements. More affluent neighbourhoods with higher taxes in the United States can close libraries without complaints from patrons. Whether a library was open was also dependent on the type of library. Take for instance medical librarians who benefited from the advice of the medical community. They were working from home because the hospitals felt that the virus could spread through library services. These librarians utilized electronic databases to fill requests for articles. They physically went to work if there was a print document that could not be accessed from home.

On the contrary, academic librarians remarked that they were still working when classes on campus were switched to an online format. Also, numerous public libraries were still open. There were a variety of ways in which libraries differentiated their services. Some limited access by creating appointments, others initiated social distancing, and some made libraries less enjoyable by cancelling programming and limiting services to browsing. Social distancing and disinfecting equipment were also a popular response by librarians that were still working. The responses varied because there were no central requirements regarding how schools, cities, and states should combat the virus.

A library director elaborated on their situation by commenting that having libraries open was saving jobs. Government policies were interfering with prospects for librarians being able to work at home. An example is a poster who commented that people could not be paid in their city if they are not working. There were also a certain number of employees that could be out at any one time. For those that could work at home, they needed to prove that they were completing their shifts. In all, it was...
easier for part-time workers to work in shifts. Yet these were the people that were the most susceptible to being laid off. Finally, a few comments asserted that the people complaining should be thankful that they have jobs when there are so many people who were furloughed or permanently fired because people were no longer visiting the library. It was not cost-effective to continue to pay them.

Coronavirus on library materials (53 comments). The originator of this post discussed a study that found that the coronavirus could survive on library materials. In responding to this post, the commenters wondered what others were doing to stop the spread of the virus on materials. At some point during the discussion, the commenters noted that there was evidence that the coronavirus is an airborne virus and the implications of being in closed environments with materials that harboured the virus were dangerous. The participants explained that many libraries were quarantining materials. Still, the most popular materials are those that are frequently checked out. Hence, quarantining materials only serves to increase the wait time for requested items. Others responded that they appreciated the study but wondered if it was accurate because of the controlled environment, in which it was conducted. Books are often left in outdoor book drops for long periods of time and in moist conditions.

Libraries and coronavirus (49 comments). Librarians noted that schools are essential, but they had to close and that it is not practical for workers to die so that individuals can have Wi-fi services. The library workers discussed the implications of using libraries as centres for addressing social issues. For example, forum participants asserted that libraries should not be places for treating overdoses, sheltering the homeless, and taking care of children. Nevertheless, the librarians were wary of patrolling patrons to ensure that they followed new protocols for the COVID virus. Tensions were high, and some patrons were abusive when their expectations about access were not met.

The Public Librarian Declaration (47 comments). In this post, the original commentator talked about what libraries do for their communities and how communities should try to reciprocate by protecting library workers. The participants commented that felt that society was failing them. Libraries serve as a safety net, but society did not care about how the pandemic impacted library employees. It was argued that closing would significantly affect the minorities and the homeless that rely on libraries. But librarians are not social workers, and more emphasis should be placed on finding appropriate places for the public to receive social services. Some post contributors felt that they were being described as essential, although they were being paid low salaries like public servants. There was no hazardous pay to account for the risk placed on their lives and the risks they were taking by going to work.

2. Research Question 2

The purpose of Research Question 2 was to determine the strategies that librarians felt were effective for coping with COVID-19. While mining the data to find the strategies that were determined to be effective, recurring themes relating to managerial practices that were disconcerting during the pandemic were noticed. Some subreddit r/libraries community members did not like it when administrators used them to clean libraries after closing. They also disliked it when they were not informed of the plans to cope with the pandemic. In some cases, advertisements were made encouraging students to go to the library after schools
closed. In this case, the libraries felt that the library was serving as a Petri dish. Morale was also low when administrators or directors did not leave their offices to interact with customers when the rest of the staff was required to be out in the open. It was also explained that security guards were important for controlling access to the library. In addition to expressing some of the issues taking place during the pandemic, several strategies were offered that they felt were effective. Table 23.1 lists the effective strategies.

3. Research Question 3

Using the posts with the most comments, Research Question 3 was designed to determine which questions were asked the most in the community about COVID-19. The libraries’ subreddit community asked various questions as members tried to troubleshoot how to respond to the pandemic. Some questions were asked, probably with the anticipation that no one on the message board would be able to answer them. Other questions were asked to find out what other libraries were doing. An example is the question of how many librarians were working from home. Another poster wanted to know how libraries were handling interlibrary loans to report the response to a supervisor. The community members converged on the message board to compare what was happening in libraries, vent about their circumstances, and find solutions to implement in their workplaces. Table 23.2 provides a summary of the questions that were asked.

6 Discussion

6.1 Limitations

A limitation of this study is that it relied on the search term “COVID-19.” There are other ways to describe COVID-19, such as using COVID, coronavirus, and pandemic. After selecting the search term, the dataset was further delimited by choosing the top five posts with the most comments. As a consequence, this article introduces how librarians utilized social media to discuss COVID-19. There is more data to be studied relating to libraries, social media, and the pandemic.

6.2 Librarian concerns

For the posts that were examined, systematic issues within the library science professional community were revealed. The library workers were most concerned with securing their jobs while staying safe, finding solutions to provide services while protecting the public, stating their significance in society, and learning about the safety measures that should be followed. Workers struggled to find solutions for navigating the political environments induced by the pandemic, which influenced the decisions that were made about their jobs, and ultimately, their livelihoods. As indicated by the posts, municipalities, schools, and universities waited for directions from government agencies. Frequently, participants stated that they had lost faith in their leaders because decisions were not made promptly, and they felt they were left as community servants without compensation for the risks they assumed for serving.

There were logical solutions for offering quality services, such as remote reference services. Still responses often suggested these solutions were avoided because of the
Table 23.1 Effective strategies for responding to the coronavirus in libraries.

- Closing libraries to stop the spread
- Practicing safety measures by cleaning and using protective wear and protective equipment
- Cancelling events
- Removing toys, puzzles, and paper from the library
- Staggering computer terminals
- Practicing social distancing
- Limiting the number of patrons with access
- Restricting services to checking out books
- Cancelling staff meetings
- Waiving late fees
- Extending loan periods
- Limiting onsite staff to accepting material returns and answering questions via phone and email
- Having a union representative to advocate for paid leave
- Taking paid leave instead of working in dangerous conditions
- Creating a plan before there is an outbreak in the community
- Communicating daily with administration
- Buying cleaning supplies and protective gear in bulk
- Rationing disinfectant and sanitizer
- Creating a pandemic policy that states adults must accompany school-aged children
- Offering curbside services
- Scheduling limited shifts for library workers
- Using digital libraries to offer reference services from home
- Rotating shifts for onsite and offsite work
- Focusing on digital resources instead of face-to-face services
- Limiting regular staff to utilizing the library for virtual programming equipment while supervisors work in the library and complete dangerous tasks
- Offering individuals with medical issues the ability to work from home
- Coming to work 1 day a week for hands-on projects (i.e., new books, weeding, and book returns)
- Offering no contact returns
- Providing case-by-case exceptions for working at home (i.e., elderly parents and childcare issues)
- Receiving support from the local Department of Health
- Meeting via teleconferencing platforms such as Skype, GoToMeeting, and Zoom
- Using outdoor spaces for customers who need Wi-fi and staff for social distancing during breaks
- Directing patrons to Listservs to request articles
- Quarantining books
- Sterilizing books with alcohol and Clorox wipes
- Using a self-checkout system
- Implementing shorter hours and no night shifts
- Loaning out laptops
- Providing virtual reference services
- Implementing extracleaning between library programmes
- Touching library cards less
- Limiting interlibrary loan to the electronic collection
- Giving patrons cleaning supplies to wipe equipment before and after usage
- Implementing shorter hours and no night shifts
- Loaning out laptops
- Providing virtual reference services
- Implementing extracleaning between library programmes
- Touching library cards less
- Limiting interlibrary loan to the electronic collection
- Giving patrons cleaning supplies to wipe equipment before and after usage
need for libraries to justify their existence. Many librarians sought proof that libraries need to offer in-person services outweighed the health risks to library workers and community members. Ultimately, for numerous participants answers were received when decision makers mandated that the doors were left open to supplement community needs.

### 6.3 Library education

There were implications for library education. The questions asked by the librarians highlight the need for better disaster training for librarians. The devastation imposed by COVID-19 is atypical because it has caused healthcare and economic crises. On top of that, the effect of the pandemic underscored social disparities and increased social tensions. Librarians are adaptable and have some understanding of coping with crises (Erich, 2020). These crises frequently include natural disasters, community unrest, and bomb threats, from their education and professional resources. Much like the institutions they work for and the communities they serve, librarians were not prepared to face a virus that was asymptomatic in some and produced devastating symptoms in others. Hence, the Reddit posts show that librarians felt that the responses were often not adequate to protect essential workers’ lives, such as theirs.

| Table 23.2 | Questions asked about COVID-19 in libraries. |
|-------------|---------------------------------------------|
| · How will libraries know when to reopen? |
| · How do librarians serve low-income populations that need Wi-fi and computers if they are closed? |
| · How will library closings impact the census? |
| · How will children access Wi-fi for their distance learning if the library is closed? |
| · How will library workers without benefits cope if they must take off from their jobs during closings? |
| · How should librarians de-escalate situations with patrons that appear to be sick? |
| · What policies should be in place for sick patrons? |
| · How will closings impact elections and the ability of community members to vote? |
| · How essential are library services during the pandemic? |
| · How do librarians provide services to immunocompromised and elderly individuals without jeopardizing their health? |
| · Is the surface transmission of COVID-19 something that librarians need to worry about? |
| · How long should books be quarantined? |
| · How does humidity in the book drop impact virus growth and transmission? |
| · Should library workers be focused on aerial transmissions rather than quarantining materials? |
| · Why are librarians at work when they can work from home? |
| · How should library workers handle interlibrary loans when they are working remotely? |
| · What are the benefits of libraries staying open that are more pertinent to stopping the spread of the COVID-19? |
| · If libraries are essential, why are the budgets so low? |
| · What populations are still accessing libraries during the COVID pandemic? |
In the future, there needs to be more of an emphasis on managerial training to assist directors in communicating with key stakeholders, building morale, and being transparent. There is a need for people to be culturally aware and understand how to express empathy for others experiencing life-changing circumstances. So many of the posters just wanted someone to care about their viewpoint. Moreover, there is a need to provide guidance on identifying the best resources for learning about a healthcare crisis. The posts on Reddit wavered between stating that everyone should be fine if they washed their hands and the COVID-19 virus being airborne and deadly. It seems that the individuals posting would have felt safer if there was more empathy for them and their needs, administrative transparency, and a unified resource to provide guidance for libraries.

### 6.4 Service adaptability

According to the Reddit posters, there were notable differences in how libraries adapted the services that were offered. Some libraries closed completely. Others initiated hybrid services, while others were online. Furthermore, there was a discussion about how libraries should not be the places that offer social services. Examples of adaptability included curbside service, appointment-based face-to-face book browsing, and virtual programming.

The difference between the psychological counseling offered in Romania (Erich, 2020) and the library personnel’s discussion on Reddit indicates some resistance to providing social services. However, these services are available at various libraries. The discussion suggests that it may be helpful to explore offering social services in libraries by using credentialed professionals. Such is the case of Dominican University (2020) that offers a joint social work and librarianship degree. Perhaps more of these degrees should be available in the United States to assist libraries that address social service needs in communities. On the contrary, Wahler et al. (2020) suggest that having a social worker that collaborates with libraries is an option that should be explored. As indicated by Erich (2020), by the adaptations initiated by libraries during the pandemic, psychological services provided by libraries during crises is a service that could be advantageous.

### 6.5 Addressing disparities

A theme that arose from the posts was socioeconomic disparities. Librarians were aware that if their libraries closed, their patrons would not likely to be able to access materials, the Internet, and services. Patrons cannot use digital services when they do not have the Internet. A lack of Internet is also troublesome for students that were switched to online classes. Libraries are often the sole access point for computers and the Internet for low-income families (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, n.d.; Kirchner, 2020). This is especially true during disasters (Young, 2018).

The posts suggest that libraries in lower income neighbourhoods were less likely to close. Still, these libraries were not equipped to maximize services because of a lack
of support systems (tax and income) to finance the equipment that their communities needed and to allow staffing to continue the way it was before the pandemic. Families in lower SESs needed more help, to address their educational needs. However, the resources were not available.

7 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study examined how librarians addressed the COVID-19 virus by using Reddit posts with the keyword COVID-19 in the subreddit libraries community. Overall, librarians frequently commented about how to modify services, how libraries are used during the pandemic, safety issues, and strategies that worked in their libraries. Librarians also shared examples of practices that did not work in their libraries and asked each other questions about library services and management. The posts signified that there was no central guidance for librarians. The lack of central guidelines needs to be understood because the COVID-19 pandemic presented circumstances that have never been experienced before in modern history. In addition, libraries are present in various settings such as universities, hospitals, municipalities, schools, and law offices.

Based on this study, it is recommended that library organizations and educational programmes work in collaboration to prepare the workforce for the problematic scenarios presented by the pandemic. Posts by the participants further suggest that cultural awareness and empathy training should be developed for managers of library workers because several posts suggested that a divide existed between management and workers. This training is needed in the public, academic, special, and school library settings. Finally, more joint degree programmes with an emphasis on providing social work could improve library services.

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