KBR during the Covid pandemic: Accelerated roll-out of the digital strategy and preparations for a museum opening

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Abstract
The covid pandemic forced KBR, Belgium’s national library, to close its doors to the public and staff on March 18, 2020. The opening of a new museum had to be postponed. But ultimately, the covid closure led to an accelerated rollout of KBR’s digital strategy.

Keywords
Belgium, digital strategy, KBR, museum, national library

The national library of Belgium
Since 1836, KBR is the national scientific library of Belgium and collects all Belgian publications. The library preserves, manages and studies over 8 million documents, thus forming the largest heritage collection in the country. Its historical collections include some 40,000 manuscripts, 300,000 old and rare books, 700,000 prints and 150,000 maps. KBR is located in the historic heart of Brussels, next to the central railway station. It is not only a library that attracts over 100,000 physical users a year for its own activities but also an imaginative building by famous architect Houyoux. Annually, between 100 and 200 external events are hosted, welcoming some extra 25,000 visitors to KBR. The public is always welcome for a guided tour in the remarkable building at the Mont des Arts. The ubiquitous marble, aluminium and woodwork radiate the prestige of the 1950s. The building also houses 15 partner organisations, ranging from the archives for French-language literature and the American Fulbright Commission to research centres specialising in codicology, bibliography and history of science.

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In its action plan for the years 2019–2021, KBR expressed the wish to contribute to the democratic foundations of an increasingly digital society by making a large amount of authentic information available to citizens. This strategy places the user – and the way in which he processes information – at the heart of KBR activities and collections and proposes new ways of working based on participation. Technology will be integrated into all actions KBR undertakes and will support the staff and their expertise.

This new strategy also led to a new name: the Royal Library of Belgium became KBR after a participatory project with the stakeholders in 2018 and 2019. Two-hundred thirty staff and 33 scientists continue, under this new name and in a new house style, the tasks of the national library: collecting and unlocking all Belgian publications and preserving the historical, scientific and literary memory of our country by means of an annual federal government grant of 15 million euros, supplemented by its own income and project-based funding up to nearly 17 million euros.

The action plan defined five priorities in the coming years: putting more information online, improving access to that information, facilitating research in digital humanities, creating a cultural program for a broad audience, updating the reception infrastructure, the reader areas and the exhibition and leisure areas and make them more accessible.

This strategy responds to changes in the operation of libraries all over the world, that are confronted with shifts in the profile of their users. Fewer people are finding their way to the reading rooms in Brussels: declining from over 75,000 general readers a decade ago, a little under 50,000 readers still visit the library. In addition, the reading rooms for the consultation of heritage pieces attract a more constant audience of approximately 7,000 people a year. However, at the same time, more people than ever consult the KBR website: over 260,000 in 2019. They visited the online catalogues and the information about the collections or consulted the digitised documents themselves.

**Corona crisis strikes Belgium**

The corona crisis hit Belgium on 3 February 2020, upon the return of a Belgian citizen from China. The spread of the virus increased rapidly from 1 March onwards, due to the fact that many people who had been on a skiing holiday returned to work or to school. The Belgian federal government took a number of measures aiming mainly at preventing the spread of infection. This was done at various stages as the severity and extent of the crisis became more apparent. On 11 March, the government announced that the virus had claimed its first life.

As of 13 March 2020 at midnight, heavy restrictions were imposed on bars and restaurants, universities and schools closed their doors and lessons were suspended, sales in non-essential shops were limited to weekdays only. That same day, KBR imposed its staff members to work from home to the extent their job description permitted.

On 18 March 2020, Belgium went into a so-called ‘lockdown light’. From then on, only essential shops remained open (food stores, pharmacies, etc.) and all non-essential movements were forbidden. Like all other public institutions, KBR had to close its doors to the public and to its own staff (See Figure 1).
Closure of KBR

The strategy of ‘digital transformation’ of the institution started in 2019, but the work on it was severely affected by the corona crisis and the subsequent closure of KBR. The public only had access to the collections through the catalogue and digital platforms.

These restrictions implied that no more than about 10% of the items that could be consulted in situ under normal circumstances was available. The rest, the vast majority of the collections, remained inaccessible. During the closure, KBR put a maximum effort into making new digital material available. In just 3 months, more than 50,000 digitised pages came online. But in the meantime, an urgent need for a digitisation on demand service to the public, as already mentioned in the digital transformation strategy discussed above, became apparent.

Another result of the corona crisis was the postponement of the opening of the long-awaited KBR museum, initially planned for 15 May 2020. During the lockdown, the KBR team remained very motivated and has continued to work enthusiastically on the preparations. On 17 September 2020, the museum was inaugurated by His Majesty the King of Belgium and on 18 September, the doors opened to the general public.

Belgium has been hiding a treasure for 600 years! Six centuries ago, Brussels belonged to the rich and powerful Dukes of Burgundy. Skilled politicians and cultured patrons, they established a stirring treasure, a unique and fascinating collection of manuscripts: The Library of the Dukes of Burgundy. These masterpieces, which have...
survived the ravages of time and of history, are now emerging from the KBR-vaults via its new museum. The 16th-century Chapel of Nassau and the various rooms that surround it will form the backdrop to the museum. Today, the Library still keeps some 300 original Burgundian manuscripts that were produced between the end of the 14th and the end of the 15th century and are considered to be masterpieces of miniature art. Names such as Willem Vrelant, Jan de Tavernier, Simon Marmion or Lieven van Lathem may not ring a bell, but they were real celebrities in their day and they were as famous as Jan Van Eyck or Rogier van der Weyden, our ‘Flemish primitives’. These masterpieces should be the lever to appeal to a new and broader public for whom the consultation of the collection may no longer be a priority, but for whom the museum can play a role as a cultural catalyst. It is therefore clear that this is much more than just a new museum. It is about a new culture, in which KBR wants to focus on the user and on keeping his experience at the centre of our attention.

**Top priorities after reopening**

KBR reopened to the staff on 25 May 2020 and to the public on 15 June. Due to the complexity of the building, the diversification of activities and the many different types of readers, this operation was carried out in stages, so that everyone was guaranteed a pleasant and safe visit (See Figure 2).

*Figure 2. Access to part of the reference collection was blocked off to reduce reader circulation.*
In the first phase, KBR only allowed people who really needed to physically consult a document or an object for their study or research. Those who could continue their research after delivery of a scan were asked to select this option. After the first wave of the corona crisis and upon reopening of KBR, three actions for the expansion of digital services were selected as top priorities: as of 15 June, the entire content of digital platforms BelgicaPress and BelgicaPeriodicals became remotely accessible. The only condition remained that they were used within the framework of research or for illustrative purposes in education. In this way, KBR vigorously respected existing copyright legislation. The platforms offered more than 3.5 million digitised pages from Belgian newspapers (1814–1970) and almost 500,000 digitised pages from Belgian periodicals (1813–1999). In addition, Belgica already offered access to more than 70,000 heritage documents from its own KBR collection, with millions of pages to browse: manuscripts, old and rare books, as well as maps, plans, prints, music, coins and medals.

All electronic sources were also made remotely accessible: no less than 100 databases, 5000 e-journals and 62,000 e-books could be consulted from home.

And KBR created a new service, Digit on Demand: a quick scan of the documents a reader requests into a digital file so there is no longer the need for the applicant to come to the premises. Requests will be processed considerably faster than before, because KBR has increased its scanning capacity: not only will extra staff be deployed for

**Figure 3.** Fifteenth-century manuscripts being removed from KBR museum during the second lockdown.
rendering this service but also four robotic scanners and two specialised digitisation stations will be installed before the end of the year.

It is clear that through Digit on Demand KBR makes available to the public any document, part of a document or piece from its collections, for which an individual request for digitisation has been made. As a national library, KBR however gives priority to preserving and making available its collections that belong to the Belgian heritage, in other words, the works and documents produced over the years and centuries in the areas that make up present-day Belgium or by Belgians abroad. To this must be added the unique documents and objects kept by KBR. Both criteria – Belgian and unique – demarcate the perimeter of the collections that are the subject of a digitisation service on demand. Consequently, requests for digitisation of sources that do not belong to this perimeter will generally not be taken into account. For these documents, we try to provide the reader with a hyperlink to a source available in another digital library.

On 15 June 2020, 1 of the 8 existing reading rooms opened its door, where a maximum of 20 readers could consult all types of documents. This was possible after online reservation of a seat in advance and on weekdays only. These places were primarily intended for those who need to consult physical documents within the framework of research or studies and could only be reserved for an entire morning or afternoon. During lunch break, the reading room closed for a thorough cleaning of all seats. At this stage of the reopening, KBR exceptionally used the Rare Books Reading Room for the general public because it was situated on the ground floor, close to the main entrance of the building. All types of documents could be consulted there, thus limiting the area in which people circulated. The reading room has been refurbished to guarantee a distance of 1.5 m between persons. Readers had to wear mouth masks and disinfect their hands before entering the reading room. Protective measures were also taken for staff members, for example, by installing screens in plexiglass at the information desk.

After a few weeks of operations, it became apparent that readers had to wait an average of 14 days before they could reserve a place, which was obviously far too long. KBR then chose to expand the capacity from 1 October 2020 onwards but still had to respect distance and hygiene measures. In the general reading room, it could provide 50 places in safe conditions, more than double the initial capacity, and seat an additional number of students in the newspapers reading room. At the same time, opening hours were extended and the library reopened on Saturdays.

The near future

As elsewhere in Europe, Belgium faced a second wave of Covid in the autumn of 2020, so KBR had to close its doors again from 19 October to 8 December (See Figure 3).

Since reopening KBR monitors the evolution of the situation and will adapt operations to current events. After all, timing completely depends on the evolution of the situation and on government instructions. What has become clear however is that the roll out of the digital strategy will be accelerated to better serve our readers from a distance and that the work on a museum will continue in full swing to attract a new and broader public in our own building.
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Sara Lammens (1978) studied Musicology and Philosophical academy in Louvain. She started her professional career as a researcher at the Alamire Foundation, the international centre for the study of music in the Low Countries. In 2004 she moved to the Royal Library of Belgium (KBR), where she worked as the Head of the Music Department and later as the Head of the Communications Department. In 2013 she became the Support Services Director. Since 1st May 2017 she has been the General Director a.i.