Library collections and services during Covid-19: Qatar National Library experience

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Abstract
The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic made a tragic impact on the entire world throughout the economy, education, businesses, health, jobs and so on. In order to survive this disease, and to minimise the losses, most of the businesses and educational institutions switched to the virtual and offered online services with the help of technology. This article describes how Qatar National Library embraced the situation and what it offered in terms of collections, services and support.

Keywords
Covid-19, national libraries, pandemic, public libraries, Qatar National Library, virtual services

Introduction
The World Health Organization defines Covid-19 as an infectious disease caused by the newly discovered coronavirus (World Health Organization, 2020). Its widespread across continents and outbreak worldwide made this pandemic tragic and impacted healthcare systems, societies, businesses, education and economies. Thousands of infected people, job losses, business closures and schools and universities lockdown followed by a shift to online learning made the pandemic one of the worst in the history with over one million deaths reported in the world.
Academic, public and National libraries were directly marked by the Covid-19 virus not only in terms of physical space but also in the collections and services they provide to their community.

Librarians support the patrons’ activities (research, events and exhibits, borrowing and digital resource supply) and during the pandemic, the whole emphasis was on the provision of comprehensive online support.

At the global level, the American Library Association (ALA) has put together a comprehensive guide and best practices and protocols for librarians to refer to; the ALA Covid-19 recovery centre includes guidelines for reopening the Libraries by State (ALA, 2020a).

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) developed key resources that tackle major issues facing all libraries (remote services, hygiene, handling materials, staying at home, closing or reopening, etc.) (IFLA, 2020).

IFLA also gathered all data and best practices from Libraries in the United States, Europe and the Middle East on how each Library is dealing with the closure and what systems were put in place to maintain their services to their users. An update to any process was possible by corresponding with IFLA. It became the reference to consult before modifying the procedures in the Covid-19 era.

Major publishers and e-resources providers were quick in responding to the pandemic and supported the librarians in their mission to deliver undisrupted and reliable information services to patrons.

Here are some examples from prominent publishers:

- Sage created a Covid hub that includes podcasts, presentations, legislations, wellness essentials and more, https://www.sage.com/en-us/coronavirus/.
- Elsevier ScienceDirect compiled a resource packet that includes toolkits, resources for libraries’ reopening and more, https://www.elsevier.com/connect/library-connect/covid-19-resources-for-librarians-and-their-library-users.
- Springer Nature launched a page ‘Library resources to assist with the pandemic’, https://www.springernature.com/gp/librarians/landing/covid19-library-resources.

Hybrid Libraries had to shift to digital in a short period during Covid-19. This created major challenges and opportunities. The challenges were to adopt a comprehensive platform for events and sessions that were taking place virtually and to add or enhance the electronic resources’ page that is the main access point to the Library portal.

Throughout the world, the Library as a cultural hub or academic space suffered most from the closure; the pandemic caused the disruption of events, reduction and suspension of access to the space, thus paralysing the borrowing activities and all related services offered inside the Library. In addition, visiting the Library in some countries required booking a pre-confirmed appointment, in alignment with the Government decisions and policies.

The State of Qatar like all other countries had to deal with the pandemic following the international guidelines and its Government and Ministry of Public Health (MoPH)
policies and procedures. Qatar National Library (QNL) is the centre for cultural activities, events and academic research, and hence was included in the countrywide plan in several phases.

**Libraries in Covid-19 times**

The major academic and public libraries in Qatar followed the safety procedures and operated virtually through their webpages. Books’ borrowing was extended, and the users were informed frequently about the updates related to academic and governmental decisions especially with the lift of the lockdown and the gradual reopening in alliance with the four phases initiated by the State of Qatar.

Considered the biggest and most popular Library in the State of Qatar, QNL moved fast its operations in line with the MoPH instructions and operated online since March 2020.

**Qatar National Library**

*Physical spaces.* The Library which opened its doors since 7 November 2017 plays three roles as a National Library, Public Library and a Research Library. Its mission as articulated is to ‘preserve the nation’s and region’s heritage and enable the people of Qatar to positively influence society by creating an exceptional environment for learning and discovery’.

The Library is 45,000 square metres facilities designed by Rem Koolhaas who envisioned the main entrance as an urban plaza, so that visitors can see each element of the Library upon entering. The outer shape of the building is conceived as two plates that are pulled apart and folded like a piece of paper to provide an enclosure like in Figure 1.

It is an open space inviting its visitors to the democratic expression and to exchange of ideas. Unlike conventional Libraries, the collection is displayed in a tier structure and the books are elevated in the terrace. There are three main tiers (Figure 2) connected by a bridge.

In addition to full-text online resources, the Library has more than one million books in its collections, along with more than 500,000 e-books, periodicals and newspapers, and special collections. The Library offers many events, programmes and activities for the local community to do, learn and discover.

The Library was designed to offer large facilities like event and exhibition spaces, innovation stations, public computing, study spaces, Children and Young Adults Libraries, restaurant and café, community programmes and events, reading, study and collaborative spaces, and instruction rooms.

The emergence of Covid-19 and its rapid spread has forced the Library to close its doors on 11 March 2020. All face-to-face services and physical spaces were closed to the public. To deal with the lockdown and keep its services running, the Library initiated a ‘Digital Transformation’ task force whose main function was to coordinate all the transformation of the QNL services into digital initiatives.

This affected the collections, services and staff.
Collections. To facilitate access to the collections, emphasis was put on the electronic resources that became the main option of the Library Public Access Catalogue, as well as the Qatar Digital Library which is an open academic source accessible to all. Online resources were now more visible and were promoted in the constant need to reach out to

Figure 1. Library building (courtesy of Qatar National Library).

Figure 2. Tiers in the main plaza (courtesy of Qatar National Library).
the users. General orientation resources saw an increase of usage of 100% where users had no choice but to access their favourite magazines, watch documentaries and read online books during the lockdown. The Library highlighted more than 30 comprehensive subject guides including ones that cover accurate information sources related to the pandemic.

Sections of the website were revamped to highlight the online access points and any online services being offered. Information about the Library (fee waiver, events and main updates) was posted on the Library website.

**Services.** The Library moved to virtual, and users got support through LibAnswer, LibChat, LibraryAware and virtual research and writing consultations. The virtual support was extended as it was the only way to assist the users.

The Library used to offer around 90 events per months, and as a replacement, most of the events and programmes moved to the Microsoft Teams digital platform. Forums were also organised with simultaneous interpretation through Voiceboxer.

The Library also increased public engagement by using social media platforms to promote its programmes and resources and publishing tutorials. The most used are Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. The Library also hosted events with speakers and United Nations Forums gathering Ministers and Heads of States and promoted culture, diplomacy and how nations can reach common grounds through culture and sports. Those events were well received by the community.

Initially, the Library used to organise school visits on a weekly basis, and during the lockdown offered virtual tours instead.

The Children and Young Adult Libraries organised competitions online that witnessed a huge success.

To facilitate access, the membership form was modified to allow instant access to the e-resources after submission of the online request.

The Access Services automatically extended all due dates and cancelled all overdue notifications and fines. Email support was also extended till late night.

Although the Library was totally closed, users kept returning some of their borrowed books, and the shelving maintenance unit managed once per month to come to the Library and return the books through the book sorter which was switched on initially for this purpose. By that, the flow of returned books was kept under control and shelves were kept in order.

The Interlending and Document Supply (ILDS) helped lots of researchers get materials online and provided more than 800 articles since March 2020 to date. In addition, the IFLA group Document Delivery and Resource Sharing (DDRS) launched since April 2020 a new initiative Resource Sharing during Covid-19 (RSCVD) with the aim to support all libraries around the world with articles and book chapters. Being an IFLA active member, the QNL volunteered and provided to date 239 articles to Libraries all over the world.

The Library also was engaged heavily through social media (content, live sessions with experts and competitions).
The Heritage Library continued to serve its users by providing soft copies of resources that are out of copyright on demand, and the digitisation section continued actively digitising several collections.

**Opening phases (1st July–to date)**

All institutions in Qatar were following closely the recommendations of the MoPH concerning any updates related to the spread, evolution and control of the Covid-19 pandemic. In July 2020, after going through the peak of the pandemic, the MoPH issued reopening plans and going back to work gradually through four phases, and each phase would see more institutions opening their doors and the increase of the number of staff inside offices, taking into account all health and safety measures at the work space, even outside, in public spaces.

In alignment with the MoPH plan, QNL drew an opening plan with restricted services, with restricted number of staff allowed to work from inside the Library. And on 15th July, the Library opened its doors to the public.

**Health and safety**

After the gradual opening, the Library visits were only done through appointment on the website. The age group allowed was from 13 to 59, in alignment with the MoPH recommendations. For that, the space in the Library was calculated in order to accept 30% visitors and respecting the social distancing, hence creating a secure environment. All seating spaces and tables were rearranged in a way to provide a secure environment, as shown in Figure 3.

As a result, the Library during phase 1 accommodated 200 visitors per day divided into two slots, to increase gradually to 600 visitors per day divided into three slots as of October. The first slot is 8:00 a.m.–10:00 a.m., the second slot is 10:30 a.m.–2:30 p.m. and the third slot is 3:30 p.m.–7:30 p.m.

Masks are all mandatory to staff and visitors and shields were installed in all the public areas.

Regular cleaning, antimicrobial disinfectants were placed all over the Library near the elevators, hand sanitisers are installed on each table and near the self-borrowing stations and so on.

Staff and visitors while entering the Library must have the temperature checked along with a health status application which is compulsory to be on each individual’s mobile phone and without it, any entry to any public space would be forbidden.

Procedures on reporting a Covid case or in case any symptoms arise are strongly implemented.

**Facilities and services**

The restaurant and café were still closed at the first phase, but gradually reopened for staff and public with limited seating capacities.
Lots of the services are still closed and interrupted, but users can come to the Library to study, meet, borrow a book, sit in the café or restaurant, use the services of the Innovation Stations, pick up their membership card and use the reference services.

**Shelves and borrowing privileges**

To minimise any contagious spread, all shelves were closed to the public, and books were prepared by staff and put aside into bags and given to the users who visit the Library by appointment. The book(s) is ready for collection at the User Services Desk and for that uses only the self-borrowing stations to borrow.

Today access to the physical collection is restricted as staff provides the books for patrons upon request and pre-booked visit.

**Book return**

The seven automated return stations inside the Library were temporarily stopped as part of the safety measures, and only the drive-through drop-off station was open 7 days a week 15 hours a day, and manual bins installed at the entrance of the Library were provided. The drop-off station is directly connected to the Library Management System and users account is cleared on the spot.
All returned books are put on a 5 days quarantine before being returned to the shelves through the book sorter.

**Children Library and Young Adult space**

The Children Library and the Young Adult space are still closed to the public, and all book requests from both collections were honoured following the same process, and parents or young adults 13+ pick up the books from the Library.

The opening measure also restricted borrowing DVDs, CDs, laptops, headphones, iPads and mobile chargers as part of the safety measures. Access to the printed magazines and newspapers is still closed.

**Heritage Library**

The Heritage Library as part of the same procedures, opened its doors to the public, and, to limit access to the printed materials, provided a digital copy of any book requested via email. In addition, its reading room was open to allow any study or consultation.

**Staffing**

Nearly 30% of all staff were operating from inside the Library and all others were working remotely. But, some departments like the Access Services, to be operational had to start as a minimum of 50%, to reach 100% on the second reopening phase. The Facility Management team are also operating from inside the Library as well as the digitisation team who, despite the lockdown worked in the Library on a scheduled basis. To date, 80% of the staff are now back to the Library, excluding any high-risk employees due to chronic disease or health-related issues, where they will keep working remotely.

**SWOT analysis**

The severe Covid pandemic imposed for businesses to reassess their situation, functions and priorities. Strategic plans were revisited, and priorities reorganised considering the pandemic. Libraries being at the centre of the societies drew their Strength/Weaknesses/Opportunities/Threats below.

**Strengths**

- Since its inception, QNL is characterised by a *robust infrastructure* namely in the physical spaces, qualified staff, information technology, pioneer programmes and events. Those pillars were the main strengths in the remote work at the beginning of the pandemic and when the library was closed.
- *Extensive electronic resources available 24/7*. QNL has been providing access and adding e-resources to support the activities of its community. During the lockdown, emphasis was placed on e-resources and e-books access through PressReader, Overdrive, EBSCO, Springer, Taylor and Francis, Wiley and more.
○ Strong leadership and communication with the management

During the lockdown, staff were kept informed of the procedures by their line managers and higher administration, which helped them set priorities and answer the users’ queries in a timely manner.

Weaknesses

○ Short time frame

Libraries worldwide were not prepared for operating totally virtually in a short time frame and juggling between different platforms (Microsoft Teams, Library platforms and e-resources, Webex, etc.) and making quick decisions on the best software or virtual programme.

○ Lack of interaction with the users

The Covid pandemic imposed a lack of physical interaction with the users, who might be getting misinformed about the virus and its treatment from various random sources; librarians feel it is their responsibility to combat misinformation and in this situation, it is hard to follow up with the researchers who are working totally remotely.

○ Mental health

The uncertainties around the Covid-19 virus, the possible need for hospitals/intubation in worst scenarios, the need to cope and isolate might increase anxiety and mental health issues. In a study conducted in Germany, Covid-19 proved to have not only an acute physical impact but also a psychological burden (Munk et al., 2020).

Opportunities

○ Open access to educational and electronic resources

Covid-19 has created an opportunity that was long awaited by librarians and that is open access. In fact, proprietary database providers and big publishers have been monopolising the scholarly communication imposing big subscription fees that have caused libraries to reduce their subscriptions.

During the pandemic, librarians promoted open access resources, and the databases followed the trend by providing open access for a limited period to their academic bundles.

○ Experiences with virtual reference, virtual services, virtual meetings, videoconferencing and so on.

The Library implemented the virtual instant chat and instant memberships to the users to support their needs. Online meetings with the library among library teams were efficient and straight to the point.
Proving effectiveness of remote work

Keeping track and monitoring tasks, providing reports, ordering books and creating memberships proved the effectiveness of remote work. Remote tasks gained popularity and might have an impact on the way we perform many tasks even after the pandemic.

Strong community support

By providing online help through virtual fitness sessions and mental support and the creation of a volunteering network. Qatar Foundation for Learning and Development (QF), a non-profit organisation made of more than 50 entities working in education, research and community development, empowered the community through online programmes, health, arts and culture and continues its online support (Qatar Foundation, 2020).

Threats

Impact of the Library on society

Users who depend on libraries to use the facilities like the computers, the printers, and use the print books.

The Library being like a ‘living room’ to many of the users created a safe and friendly environment and allowed them to gather and meet and express themselves through its collection and services (ALA, 2020b).

Impact on the strategic planning

Libraries strategic planning and key performance indicators are being revisited in the light of the drastic changes that Covid imposed. Budgets had to be reassessed according to priorities.

Is the dependence on online services and collections the way to go?

Will this structure replace the Library as a physical place? While voices emerged throughout the digital age about the obsolescence of Libraries (Herring, 2014), did the pandemic prove this point?

Updates

In light of our 10 months QNL COVID experiences that proved to be successful, updates effective January 3rd, 2021 were introduced to the Library collection and services:

The Library increased the number of visitors per day from 600 to 900 and extended the opening hours till 8:00 PM instead of 7:30 PM.

The Quarantine days for the returned items were decreased from 5 to 3 days.

A small part of Tier 1 was opened to the public to freely browse the shelves.
The shuttle bus services within the Education City started operating again.

In the Heritage Library, and due to the unique nature of the collections, the Library is studying the received request on a case by case basis before providing digital or original access to the book, taking into consideration the copyright law, as well as the physical state of the book.

**Conclusion**

Working remotely transformed the workplace, and it is now confirmed that many tasks do not require going to offices. Physical meetings that used to take hours were now done online in a more productive and concise manner. Like Twitter (Dwoskin, 2020), Google (Hartmans and Langley, 2020), Facebook (Kelly, 2020) and many multinationals in the United States announced that a lot of the tasks will remain being done from home, thus reducing the commuting and the pollution it generates on the environment went through this direction as to how best to combine the virtual with the physical.

Qatar according to HE Sheikha Hind bint Hamad Al-Thani, vice chairperson and CEO of Qatar Foundation (QF), has proven resilience and ability to overcome challenges that will see it emerge ‘even stronger’ from the global coronavirus crisis. (Qatar has proven ability to overcome challenges, 2020)

QNL embraced the new imposed lockdown and continued running with newly created jobs, and it was an opportunity rather than a challenge, as work was done from home under the directive of QNL leadership. New projects and pilot studies (internal databases clean up and users’ records updates) were conducted, the lockdown and absence of visitors made it timely to finalise those tasks that normally disrupt some user’s services.

The digital transformation proved to be a viable opportunity for staff to spread the voice of knowledge, communication and creativity and saw an unexpected reach out to the society through the programmes and events that were digitally transformed. The Access Services, Research and Learning, the Children and Young Adult Libraries, the Digitization section and the Electronic Resources section Communications Departments played an important role online when no one was expecting it. The Information Technology Department was at the heart of the transformation as it managed each staff’s IT needs to allow operations remotely.

Microsoft Teams was the officially adopted channel of communication throughout Qatar Foundation entities, where all meetings, calls, programmes and events and trainings were done. Today, staff acquired more knowledge, skills and confidence to continue offering online programmes. The new platform reached out to more users who did not have come to the Library for a specific event or were shy to manifest their voices or participation over a programme. The virtual platform helped break the fear and shyness from being among the public, and the time saved by staying home and not to commute from remote places to participate in QNL events.

Although the digital transformation went smoothly, and the Library managed to run its operations in a very short time and overcome so many challenges, the lockdown has impacted negatively on the Library building and operations. Memberships were decreased since users would visit the Library on weekends to sign for a membership and
borrow books. The Library used to receive on an average of 3000 visitors a day during the weekends. Users voiced their concerns related to the reopening of the Library, and towards borrowing print books again. It was noticed that users missed browsing the shelves looking for their resources rather than accessing the online resources.

The Library building is still a very attractive place to users (Figure 4). With the daily events, the Media Walls interactive content, the Digital Exhibitions on its 21 installed Totems, the coffee shop with its bubble chairs isolating the sound, the restaurant where all students and families meet, the beans couches inviting users to relax and sleep, the vibrant study spaces with students working in groups, the knitting programmes held on a weekly basis, the Symphonic Orchestra playing on a monthly basis inside the library, the shelves inviting users to browse and search for their books, the music room, the photography room, the 3D printing facility, the assistive technology facility, the Young Adult space vibrant with youth playing games, all layers of the Qatari society residents and visitors still benefit from what the building has to offer and are waiting to be back soon, hopefully now that the vaccine has been finalised by several companies.

QNL is still playing a vital role in the society. The Library is far from being redundant during this digitally transformation era, and the gradual reopening of the Library and daily activities are the best proof of the role it’s playing.

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