DIGITAL LIBRARY SERVICES DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS: LIBRARIANS' PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to show how Croatian libraries responded to the crisis caused by the outburst of the COVID-19 pandemic in early March 2020. This research covers period when almost all public services were in complete lockdown, including libraries. Croatian Institute of Public Health (HZJZ) and Civil Protection Headquarters issued a measures to restrict social gatherings, 'non-essential' shops working-hours, services and organization of sports and cultural events for 30 days (19/03/2020-19/04/2020). The aim of this research is to gather personal experience of public librarians during the complete lockdown. Theoretical background of this paper is grounded in crisis management. Dealing with the crisis include development positive attitude towards the crisis and the situation, setting up business activities organizations in line with environmental expectations and seeking opportunities in a crisis (Funda & Majić, 2011). This research will focus on the role of the library in the local community and wider, since during this period all library services were transferred in an online environment. This research is divided into two parts. The first part will use Tisno Public library as a case study and will show how it transformed and transferred their existing, everyday services into digital platforms, and also how librarians have adapted their existing services and how successful they were in implementing virtual content into their standard programs. The second part uses semi-structured interview with 10 public librarians in order to gain knowledge about personal experiences on their activities and how they personally dealt with the crisis. This research will answer following research questions: 1. How did Tisno Public Library and their librarians respond to crisis? 2. What difficulties did public librarians in Croatia experience during the COVID-19 lockdown period and how did they overcome them?
This health crisis has shown that libraries can exist between traditional and digital libraries, i.e. librarians are adaptable to any situation and so called 'traditional' and digital services can easily coexist. Both, services provided in physical library can be equally good and beneficial to the patrons as those provided in the virtual environment. Results of the first part showed that due to local activities, the Tisno Public Library was the first to provide assistance to citizens in overcoming difficulties with access to information during the crisis. The second part of the research gave insight knowledge on personal view of the libraries on the crisis. This crisis has also demonstrated that libraries have increasing potential to reach diverse public domain and ensure access to information. The global pandemic of COVID-19 has created rising need for digital libraries service by providing more quality and free service, but it will not change the primary role of library. In response to the crisis, the American Library Association (ALA) surveyed the community public libraries to understand the immediate effects of the crisis on their business, staff, programs and services (ALA, http). It is important to bear in mind Skip Prichard's words (OCLC): "These are unprecedented times for all of us. Libraries around the world are moving into the new and an insecure environment. Their commitment to sharing information and serving the communities has never been shaken" (OCLC, http).

Keywords: Digital services, digital library, virtual programs, crisis, COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

We are living in uncertain times and are witnessing fundamental changes in libraries and librarians' professional lives. This paper focuses on researching how global health crisis, affected all aspects of library management and librarians as providers of services for public. This

includes to research how public libraries in one Croatian County (Šibenik-Knin County) dealt with the crisis in all aspects – professional and personal. These aspects include learning and adapting to new roles and tasks in professional segment (what has changed when dealing with information, professional development (education and learning new skills), spreading information on cultural and other social events via internet, etc.). In these types of situation (pandemic) it is also important to think about one's personal response to crisis.

The first part of this paper will present the work of the Tisno Public Library which was analysed as a case study. Tisno Public Library is small rural community library. A case study will show how this library has adapted and organized its business and how it has transformed existing services into a digital environment. The task is to compare library work in general before and during the lockdown period. It will show in what aspects library changed and continued to work during the pandemic. The second part of this paper uses semi-structured interview with 9 public librarians / library managers in order to gain knowledge about professional and personal experiences on their activities and how they dealt with the crisis. The first part will answer the first research question: 1. How did Tisno Public Library and their librarians respond to crisis? The second part will answer the second research question: 2. What difficulties did public librarians in Croatia (Šibenik-Knin County) experience during the COVID-19 lockdown period and how did they overcome them?

TISNO PUBLIC LIBRARY: CASE STUDY

During the last thirty years almost all libraries in Croatia managed to implement information-communication technology in their daily workflow. This includes automation of circulation process, online catalogues, digitalization of materials, providing online services, managing profiles on social media, etc. So it is certain that most libraries had 'good starting point' when this crisis struck. Some parts of the work have been already transferred to digital environment and other had the opportunity for improvement. The Tisno Public Library is one of the libraries that provided a part of its services digitally/online long before the March 2020 when Croatia went into full lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Information for the case study was collected via library's webpage, Facebook profile, and library's documentation and in conversation with the library manager.

Since the declaration of this crisis, closure and complete lockdown the Tisno Municipality, the library manager and its employees responded quickly to the crisis and decided that they must urgently reconsider their business plan, if they want to continue to provide library services to users in such environment. On March 19th 2020 Civil Protection Headquarters issued a measure to restrict social gatherings, 'non-essential' shops working-hours, services and organization of sports and cultural events for 30 days. On April 24th they published a new set of measures and recommendations as well as the *Guidelines for working with material and users of the National and University Library in Zagreb* (Guidelines, 2019). National and University Library recommendations contain general guidelines for work during the pandemic, such as maintaining hygiene standards, social distancing of a limited number of users and employees.

Management of Tisno Public Library before the pandemic

Tisno Public Library belongs to a type of a small rural library and serves local rural, islandic community. It was extremely important to stay connected with its' community and library moved their business and services on online platforms. The main goal of the Tisno Public Library manager was to contribute and to set a positive example to the professional community by employing her professional managerial skills in difficult and challenging times.

It is important to state there are only two more librarians, besides the manager in the Tisno Public Library. In addition to the main building, Tisno Municipality allocated 4 socio-cultural

spaces for library programs and for different purposes (exhibitions, workshops, book promotions, etc.). Those spaces are dislocated from the library in three different places in the Municipality of Tisno. These spaces enabled Tisno Public Library in 2019 to organize over 350 cultural, educational and other programs.

IFLA's guidelines for public libraries emphasized that librarians serve in an increasingly complex society in which people have to adopt new skills in different media in order to be able to respond to challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. When thinking about crisis management, Funda & Majić (2011) emphasised that the most important thing is to recognize the crisis period as early as possible, to overcome it in an adequate way, and to enable the organization the path to new business successes. Prior to the pandemic, working hours were organized in two shifts. During the lockdown, two employees worked from home while one was on duty but in fact at all times all employees were active – in the library or in digital environment – covering social networks. It is important to say that the Tisno Public Library adopted an Emergency Action Plan earlier in 2019 which served as a legal basis for decision-making in management and organizing library activities during the lockdown in March 2020 (Plan, 2019).

Before the pandemic, library services and programs targeted all age groups. Those programs are: lending books, reading room, English language course for the youngest, drama groups, teaching how to use computer for senior users. All cultural and social events were organized by the library. In addition to traditional services, even before the pandemic, Tisno Public Library provided digital content via Tisno Virtual Library which was part of the official website. Facebook and Instagram accounts were also established earlier. That proved to be extremely important when the COVID-19 pandemic occurred. All library staff was already technically trained and educated to perform activities online from home. The library is well equipped and invests in professional training of their employees. It can be concluded that Tisno Public Library its staff were well equipped and prepared and therefore were able to quickly, smoothly and adequately respond to the challenges posed by this pandemic.

Tisno Public Library management during the pandemic

Tisno and Murter are two Municipalities located on the island of Murter. In March and April 2020 the island of Murter was quarantined and all transit was cut with the 'land'. Since the main Library building is located in only one part of the island, library was obligated to provide services especially to those who were completely isolated. Library staff, together with the manager, worked from home constantly communicating via social media and Virtual Library with users from the island to ensure its role as a main information and different library services provider for its local community. List of services provided by the library before and during lockdown (pandemic) is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. List of services provided by Tisno Public Library before, during and after lockdown

Services provided by Tisno PL before lockdown	Services provided by Tisno PL during lockdown	Services provided by Tisno PL after lockdown
Lending of materials	Lending of materials	Lending of materials
Using a computer in a library	No	Using a computer in a library
IT education for elderly users	No	IT education for elderly users – Online

English language course for pre-schoolers	No	No
Drama workshops for children	Online	Drama workshops for children
Creative workshops for adult users	Online	Creative workshops for adult users – Online
Creative workshops for children	Online	Creative workshops for children – Online
Stories for kids on Wednesdays	Online	Stories for kids on Wednesdays – Online
Readers' Club	Online	Readers' Club
Visiting writers	Online	Visiting writers – Online
Exhibitions	Online	Exhibitions – Online
Concerts	Online	Concerts – Online
Reading in schools and kindergartens	Online	Reading in schools and kindergartens
Reading promotion among youngest users	Online	Reading promotion among youngest users
Appropriate social and cultural program	Online	Appropriate social and cultural program – Partially Online
Knowledge quizzes	Online	Knowledge quizzes – Online
"Virtual library" PL Tisno – Partially	"Virtual library" PL Tisno	"Virtual library" PL Tisno
Creative competitions	Online	Online

In comparison to the time before the lockdown, during the pandemic Tisno Public Library managed to engage a large part of local community with programs and services they provided and therefore numbers during pandemic didn't drop. Library managed to organize almost the same number of events as at the time before the lockdown.

The goals of all decisions made in crisis management were:

1. To follow the rules of the profession; 2. To follow the decision of the National library and 3. To provide services to the users even in time of pandemic. However, it is important to acknowledge that on digital platforms users are not only passive users of the content but they seek to be actively involved in all activities offered by the virtual library.

Virtual Library Tisno

Tisno Public Library made an official decision at the beginning of the pandemic which says "In the virtual library Tisno events will take place and the contents will be provided until the end of special measures, until the return of our users and the possibility of organization of events in all areas managed by the Library. Some content will stay available on our digital platform". During the period of suspension of the work, the librarian on duty, by the decision of the library manager, was obligated to provide materials for users' requests made by phone. The reading materials were prepared and the librarian delivered them to the user with as little physical contact as possible. Tisno Public Library has book storages in 4 locations in its municipality, by which is included in the Free Little Libraries (FLL) project. FLL works on the principle 'take-read-return'. During the quarantine, in cooperation with the Civil Protection Headquarters of the Municipality of Tisno, librarians managed to fill the FLL locations in complete "lockdown zone". That was included in borrowing statistics. Number of borrowed materials in March 2020 and 2019 differs in altogether 7 loans less in 2020. Immediately after the end of lockdown, work on virtual library became part of everyday jobs of library staff.

Virtual Library Tisno was created and maintained on the library website and all communication with users went via Facebook page of the Tisno Public Library. It can be concluded that Virtual Library Tisno (VLT): 1. With its content, VLT served all age groups of users, 2. All published materials on VLT at the time of publication were free for download and use and 3. Users want to be involved and actively participate in the content provided on the VLT.

During lockdown, the VLT had 12 virtually divided programs with special contents within each category such as: E-books, Current events, Content for children, Learning and entertainment, content for adult users: Free e-books, Platform for literary expression and creativity, Online comics, Virtual tour of museums, Theatre, Films and Concerts, Art film, Online documentary, Virtual exhibitions and Reference collection. Each category was updated daily. Category named Current events was most popular. This category for example, included making a picture book with children's virtual works. Afterwards, picture book was printed and delivered to their home addresses. Online knowledge quizzes and bedtime stories were also popular. The library continued to borrow and deliver books and cultural and social events were moved in virtual environment. Although services during the lockdown and pandemic were intended for all age groups, children and parents were the biggest beneficiaries of VLT activities because children were mostly affected by the situation and the offer of extracurricular content was important for adaptation to the "new normal".

Tisno Public Library and media coverage

Since Tisno Public Library always had good cooperation with media, which continued during lockdown and pandemic. Cooperation with them was of great importance because such a large number of people could follow our news and services and be actively involved in event. It is also important to invest in the technical equipment that the library has as well as the constant education of its employees in web programs, poster making programs, video making, etc. because without that is not possible that the user reaches the desired content in the new business conditions. Coordination among employees, daily publication of literary, educational and information content, but also meeting the requirements of users in the age of social distance, proved that the Tisno Public Library successfully and adequately adapted to the challenges of the new age. In the virus-free era digital networks has always been a successful right hand to provide content to our users, but the Tisno Public Library has never completely stopped providing services to its users and allowed users to access books in all permitted ways.

In conclusion, Tisno Public Library can proudly say they actively participated in their users' lives during the lockdown and continued to do so afterwards by providing quality and curated

content which enabled them to overcome these new challenging times.

RESPONSES TO CRISIS: INTERVIEWS WITH LIBRARIES' MANAGERS OF ŠIBENIK- KNIN COUNTY

Methodology

In the second phase, sample of nine public libraries managers from Šibenik-Knin County were contacted in order to participate in an online semi-structured interview. Only five of them responded. They were asked to answer 16 question in order to answer second research question: What difficulties public librarians in Croatia experienced during the COVID-19 lockdown period and how they overcome them? All answers can be organized in four groups: 1. Organization of the work and workflow during the lockdown; 2. Library services and reaching out to community during the lockdown; 3. Challenges and opportunities during lockdown and 4. Changes after lockdown in library management and work organization.

Analysis of interviews

Organization of the work and workflow during the lockdown

Public libraries managers' form Šibenik-Knin County had different responses on the crisis regarding working hours. Only one library has more than thirty library staff. Others have between two and seven. Taking that into account, and considering the overall situation in Croatia, libraries were not pronounced 'essential' for the everyday life and public transport was stopped. That created difficulties for staff to commute. Three libraries were closed (completely or only worked part time), one organized work from home, and the only 'big' library had luxury of organizing library staff in two teams/shifts. Two had one librarian 'on duty' per week, rest of them worked from home. Only two libraries had some type of document covering emergency situations (Emergency plan, Protection from fire). Other didn't have any written document on how to work or organize work in extreme situations and they all needed to organize themselves 'ad hoc'. Regarding that, most of them said they had more responsibility regarding work organization without being in direct contact with library staff and with users as well.

Library services and reaching out to community during the lockdown

Since some libraries were closed during lockdown, they did not introduce any new services during lockdown. Others listed existing services such as: borrowing/lending of materials, reading rooms and using of computer in the library, etc. And after lockdown, many services transferred to digital environment. Most of them already used Facebook for communication with users. Some opened new channels for communication – new email, new profiles on social media (Facebook, YouTube), some gave permission for borrowing more books at once, prolonged return deadlines. Most of them organized online readings, quizzes, contests, virtual exhibitions, drawing contests, concerts streaming and other engaging online activities in order to show their users they are still there, on their service. Traditional cultural manifestations (for example, Book Night) were also moved online and book promotions, talks with authors and online activities with children – were very well accepted. All libraries used only Facebook before the pandemic and some of them stated that they started to use it more frequently and few mentioned opening YouTube channel to reach wider audience.

Only services bound to physical spaces (usage of reading rooms, computers, etc.) were not possible to be offered online, and some of the content for youngest users (for example, English for pre-schoolers) were cancelled. Most of respondents commented on cancelled book promotions and cultural events with strong social component that needed to be postponed. All respondents stated that their services were aimed to all age groups, some specified they

targeted all 'who know and can use internet', and one library emphasized that they made most of their content for children because they felt they are the most vulnerable users and needed most support because they couldn't go outside, to the kindergarten, schools, or spend time with their friends. Since only one respondent said children used most of their digital content, and other said adults, it might be concluded that librarians didn't check their online activities or didn't think it is important to see 'what is happening on their profiles'.

Challenges and opportunities during lockdown

All library directors emphasized that the biggest obstacle during the lockdown and transferring all library activities online were problems with bad and obsolete equipment and lack of digital literacy skills among library staff. These aspects are to be changed in near future. One manager expressed concern about the psychological (emotional) wellbeing of library staff. Some of them experienced concern, fear and uncertainty caused by global pandemic and global health crisis. Few of respondents said they didn't need additional training and support for creating and publishing digital content.

Changes after lockdown in library management and work organization

Library managers said that this extreme situation prepare them for work in stressed situation, they decided to move more services online, buy more e-books to support borrowing digital materials, to stay in touch with their users via social media profiles of the library. Few managers said they will focus on library staff education to empower them for better provision of library services via digital platforms. All of them emphasized that although they need to focus on online services their most important work and both sides most benefit from direct physical contact (respecting epidemiological recommendations). Opening of the libraries was most positive part of ending of the lockdown. In front of the libraries were long lines of users to return borrowed books and some of them 'just' wanted to – visit their libraries and librarians because they are all part of the same community. All managers concluded that the biggest change happened for organization of public events, not many users go to the library but many things changed for better. Few respondents emphasized how their media presence increased, media coverage had big reach and that allowed their activities to reach wider audience, and not only their local community.

CONCLUSIONS

This research focused on the role of the library in the local community during the lockdown caused by pandemic of COVID-19. First part of this research analysed Tisno Public library as a case study. Results of the case study showed that Tisno Public Library adapted to changes rather quickly and successfully. Most of their programs, activities and services were adapted to new situation and moved online. Tisno Public Library transformed and transferred their existing services into digital platforms and implement virtual content into their usual programs. The concept of a virtual library in the Tisno Public Library is a service added to the traditional library service. The most important change was usage of the digital environment which nowadays acts as an intermediary between librarians, a large amount of information and other content and users. The second part of this paper, an analysis of interviews with libraries' managers of Šibenik-Knin County, showed that libraries needed to change their organization of the work, since they were also not immune the situation caused by the new conditions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The libraries which were open during lockdown decided to transfer most of their services online. Few of them pointed out that lack of digital skills, and obsolete technical equipment were obstacles for effective provision of online services. All of them emphasized, that the lack of physical presence of users was the biggest challenge. Also in the second part of the research all library managers confirmed that many things have changed for the better in their business which lead to conclusion that the COVID Zan - 19 pandemic also had some

positive effects on library management in Šibenik-Knin County.

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