

The post-pandemic library – Podcast

INTERVIEWER 1: Welcome to the Springer Nature podcast on the post-pandemic library. We spoke to three librarians about the changes the pandemic has brought about for them and their libraries. And what lasting developments they see as a result. We're delighted to share these discussions with you here.

We started by talking with Liz Mengel, Associate Dean for Collections and Academic Services at Johns Hopkins University. For Liz, the pandemic put a real focus on how varied the roles of the library are now. And how collaboration is a crucial feature of the future. With faculty, researchers, and students, as well as with other libraries.

INTERVIEWER 2: Can I ask you first of all, what were the major cultural, physical or operational changes you are seeing prepandemic? And has the pandemic accelerated these changes, do you think, or slowed them down? And I'm thinking of things like hybrid library, blended working policy, that kind of thing.

LIZ MENGEL: Yeah. I don't know if the working policies we're moving that much into hybrid or fully remote. I do know for some of our IT staff, we had more remote options for work. But the pandemic really has changed that quite a bit. With both, what we have now both hybrid and fully remote staff working beyond just our IT staff.

In terms of collections and content, I think what I saw prepandemic, was there had been a bit of an uptick of more streaming video and the acquisition of data. The streaming video during the pandemic and post-pandemic has still just kind of skyrocketed. And the licensing for that is always just a little bit more challenging than it had been for traditional journals, databases, e-books, things like that.

Data sets can also be very challenging to license just based on their content and the producers. So those kinds of much more challenging content things are more prevalent during the pandemic and now post-pandemic too.

INTERVIEWER 2: Thank you. So how has the increasing shift to digital resources and services affected the library? Has it affected perceptions of the library by users and the institution?

LIZ MENGEL: I think it kind of varies based on discipline. The digital shift really happened in the sciences, engineering, technology, medicine, a number of years ago as more and more journals move to electronic or electronic only. Or the Journal of Record was the electronic version and no longer the print one. The humanities, social sciences, are moving a little bit differently. Social science is probably moving a little bit faster than humanities in terms of digital acceptance of things.

But to license content is very different than buying a book. So that change has affected the library. I think people often too believe that everything is electronic now. And it is not. And it

probably won't be for quite a while. And some books don't translate well into electronic. The way you read versus the way you scroll is very different.

So I think there's some time that has to happen before that's even more accepted. Let's see, the way we can use e-books is different than we were able to use print books. So there's a lot of publishers who don't allow for-- or those digital rights management on many e-books. There's not the ability to use interlibrary loan for e-books.

So I have something, someone else wants to borrow some of it. You can't do it easily. There's some publishers who are starting to allow that, and that's great. Because it allows us to really allow our collection to be used the way we have always used our collections.

INTERVIEWER 2: What do you think of-- I've heard some people talk about the embedded librarian becoming more of a thing. Is that in your opinion, the thing or not?

LIZ MENGEL: I don't know what embedded librarian means anymore. And it seems like, OK, maybe it was something in the early 2000s. But I haven't heard that term used a lot anymore. At least we don't. And so, maybe, we're an anomaly.

But I think what we're trying to think of when we think about embedding librarians is just really having that close connection with your faculty and students and helping them navigate that research lifecycle or the teaching and learning life cycle that has to happen. Different institutions have different focuses, whether they're more teaching institutions or more research institutions. But librarians can be part of both of those and knowing what's going on and being able to help people through those is I think what we've done.

And just that kind of outreach and collaboration is always there. And what we call it I think changes over time. But developing connections developing the relationships is the core of what librarians do.

INTERVIEWER 2: So is your work increasingly collaborative, say with other libraries, third parties? And do you think that's the way forward now for academic libraries?

LIZ MENGEL: Yeah. I think-- I think we are more collaborative. You know, no one library can collect everything. I know people think that all these big research institutions are going to be able to collect everything. And we can't. Even if we band together. There's so much published.

And not just here in the US, but around the world. But we're also-- I think, and I think the pandemic really kind of taught us this both at a macro level. But we're all very interconnected. If-- my-- what I do affects other people, in the same way as libraries, what we each do affects other libraries too. So I think that should be one of the great lessons of the pandemic is that we survived by working together, rather than just being some isolated institution.

I don't think anyone exists without the other. And the way forward does have to be together. And I think though collaboration has to be more than just a buzzword. When we're trying to solve

some of these really big problems that research is trying to solve, that working together has to be the way forward.

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INTERVIEWER 1: Let's move on now to Greg Sheaf, assistant librarian at Trinity College Dublin. Greg talk to us about the hybrid library and getting the balance right as we move forward. He was also struck by how users have realized the full value of the library as a result of reduced services during the pandemic.

GREG SHEAF: What I think have always been the big challenge is with how we interact with our users and internally, is a lot of them have been to do with expectations. And what do people want from you and what do you want from them. Now, a lot of that has to do with access and accessibility of both information and of services.

And we've seen this kind of accelerated and highlighted by the pandemic, where we have on one hand, people wanting more of the virtual, but also more real life interactions. And also wanting more access to digital resources. But then also still wanting access to the analog to the print resources. And the pandemic, as I think has highlights this and just made it more so.

This all this existed before COVID-19, but it just brought this to the fore. And certainly, when you cut off access and accessibility to certain things, people just discover that they really did like them. And we could see this before the pandemic with people wanting access to physical spaces to have somewhere quiet to study.

So people have been using libraries for a long time. It's somewhere to go and to be quiet and have somewhere where they can just get down to their work. As much as to access the resources that we give people. I mean the other big thing that people are always looking for before the pandemic was group study space, where people could work at this collaborative environment.

And obviously, during the pandemic we had to just close those tightly ventilated spaces off and not give anyone access. But now our students are crying out for those spaces again. And again, it's quite likely they will be coming back on stream in the very near future. Because people have been actively asking, when are you getting this back on stream again?

And obviously, what the pandemic highlighted is the need for digital access. I noticed that digital analogs there. But I think that is an oxymoron. But just-- you know what I mean. There is-- that they are looking for digital versions of our print resources and trying to pivot to giving people more access to electronic textbooks.

That's been very, very challenging. And as to-- if you were asking what are going to be the challenges facing in the future, whether it's going to be the same as before, it's going to be our budgets. And now, we're facing the people, they want both. They want the prints and the digital.

And they may not necessarily have realized just how much either one of them means then. So it's not like we can stop doing one. We have to add on the extra. So it is very challenging that you cannot stop doing something and divert money towards doing the new thing. You're being asked to do both things and support them correctly.

INTERVIEWER 2: So what impact of expanding roles and functions had on the library operationally, and on its place in the knowledge and learning management space?

GREG SHEAF: So our expanding role for many of us has been becoming more involved in the research process. I am a subject librarian, and that's one of the hats that I wear. And more and more, we being involved to become a co-author, to be an actual part of the research team.

And this is particularly true in the Health Sciences. But that's leading through into the social sciences. So that my colleagues who look after, say educational psychology or linguistics or business or even wider than that, it's bleeding into maybe even philosophy at this stage. Philosophy of mind, and that type of thing, are being asked to come on board and be part of that research team.

And they're being recognized as being experts in the field. When it comes to constructing the search, running it, putting those results together, they are the experts. And it's recognizing that myself or my colleagues have that part to play as being a team member.

So I think it's true to say that hasn't-- that isn't the case across all subjects. So for instance, if you are doing history, you are not going to be doing a search for historical material using systematic review methodology. That's just not how it's done. The same in law. If you try and do a systematic search across all the law databases, they just fall over.

But certainly, in many subjects, we are coming in more and more and being recognized as we are the people to talk to. But just not just as a service, but as an equal. And as a researcher in our own right. We have those particular set of skills which are academic colleagues do not have.

INTERVIEWER 2: So is there any move towards of embedded librarianship?

GREG SHEAF: So that's interesting. Because I remember a decade ago, that we started discussing in my institution, whether it be appropriate for say a librarian to spend X amount of days, not in the library, but over in the school of whatever, as operating some kind of clinic. So that they would be there every Tuesday morning. So that people could come to them.

And I think we did try that a few times. But then you hit problems of the Wi-Fi not being quite up to scratch or you not being at your work environment. So you don't have access to all the stuff you have on your own computer to be able to-- don't even have the bookmarks or whatever. Now, there are ways around that.

Since certainly, working remotely, often, I'm dialing into my own computer in my office rather than being on the-- writing on the computer might be [INAUDIBLE]. So that is taken that second

point away. But certainly, it's not something which is being asked as much about as far as I'm aware in my institution.

I think far more where that is becoming more and more the case is certainly in hospital settings that they've always had a-- most hospitals have always had a library. But now, they're looking for a clinical librarian to actually run searches for people and to actually be there to conduct systematic reviews. Rather than just handing them over to be again, to be part of a team.

So I think the concept of embedding people into where they are needed is an interesting one. But the reverse of that is giving people access whenever they need it to you. And in that respect, embedding someone physically in one spot, well, maybe they cannot use a webcam or whatever, is perhaps the reverse of what we need to be doing. It's more from having lived through the pandemic and having to flip to be able to talk to anyone through Zoom or through teams, anywhere on the planet. Giving people access to you from where they are, rather than having to agree on a place is perhaps more the way it should be done.

The fact that you can talk to people in Catalonia or you can talk to people in Canada or you can talk to people who are in a hotel room trying to get some work done before they have to go to a business meeting is very interesting. And I think-- so you are now in Belize where at the point of need, rather than the-- what now seems maybe a slightly old fashioned idea of being physically embedded in a place that people then have to come to to talk to you. But we've also seen where people have really discovered how much they love the library. And they have not been shy in letting our director know that.

So we get the goods. And we get the bads. But it is always lovely to get the goods. And to see just how much access to the physical space is just how access to the digital resources means to people. And being able to go somewhere which is quiet to do some study has been a real boon to many of our users. When it was taken away from them, they really felt the lack of it.

It's a mental health issue. So our director has been very good at responding to that and to making sure that people knew when we were able to offer more than we could during the most extreme periods of the lockdown in my country. But yeah, I mean, again, interacting with people, the librarian of isolation was very keen that it was known that we were-- the library was never closed.

So even when we weren't physically open, the library didn't close. And we were available for remote consultations. And to try and give people access to things digitally, and so on and so forth. So in that way, the librarians have been able to promote the library and our services and to show perhaps more that you can't take these things for granted.

Because sometimes, they can be taken away from you. And you will really feel the lack of what you have been relying upon. But not necessarily realizing that you've been relying on those services.

INTERVIEWER 2: I just wonder, is there anything that is becoming less crucial to the work of the library that you can take away-- take out of the mix?

GREG SHEAF: You'd be hard pressed to think of it. Because all of that low hanging fruit had already been whittled away when we're trying to make ourselves leaner and meaner a decade ago. Now, technology has come on.

But again, what it seems to me to be the case is people want to do extra things. And some people will still want to keep doing the same things they did before. So you can't just say we are now pivoting towards everything being available electronically. Because people do still want access to print materials.

And I witnessed an interaction as our-- service county of the day, when one of my colleagues was saying well, we have that in print in a high risk, high demand reference section. So you can't take it out. And they were going, but I really need to take this out. And there was a post graduate.

And my colleague was saying, but we have this available electronically. Like you can literally read it at home. And this post graduate was saying, but I don't like that. Can you not just override the system to let me take this print book out? With us then trying to argue you is that we only have this one copy, because we can't afford to buy lots of copies of it.

That's why there's just the one. But we did buy it electronically. And they're just not wanting that to be the answer to their query. So we cannot just pivot to say everything's online now. Because people would still even-- if we had no print books, we would want the study space. And again, we've seen how important having that quiet environment away from the kids or from the housemates is just crucial to people.

So if the library spaces didn't exist, you'd have to be inventing something like that to make up for that lack of space. So it's very hard to say. Could we stop doing anything now that we haven't already cut? People want more. They don't want you to stop doing something, because some people have relied on that way since the [INAUDIBLE], definitely are not going to change.

INTERVIEWER 2: It's interesting-- just sort of going back over what you said that the pandemic has kind of brought to the surface what people really don't want to do without?

GREG SHEAF: Yes. I think it has crystallized that for many people. So they know what's important to them. And for some people, their family is important to them, being able to talk to people is what's important to them. Or being away from the same people is what's important to them.

So having that taken away does show what you in many ways taken for granted. So having a quiet place to study, you may have taken for granted. And to have that cruelly taken away from you for x amount of months really makes you realize how important that has been to your workflow. For the people that was being accessed to physical books, they were taken away from what they considered to be their sanctuary, their workplace, for some, sanctuary for others.

So some people had that-- that got crushed-- cruelly ripped away from them. And they may not necessarily have-- they may have thought that it was a nice to have rather than an essential,

until it was taken away from them. So yeah, I think in many ways it's kind of sharpened and honed what people can't do without.

Equally, it is showing them stuff which they can use something different to. And for some people, going well, actually, seeing this online is perfectly fine. And it's actually better, because I can search within it. And I can make-- and I can make my own notes at the same time. So it has given some people opportunities to use things which they would never have gone towards. But for others, it's shown them things which they literally cannot do without.

INTERVIEWER 1: Finally, we spoke with Hilde van Wijngaarden, Library Director at the Free University of Amsterdam. Hilde talks about the ongoing success of her initiatives around the physical library, both space and books. And how she sees collaboration paving the way for the future.

INTERVIEWER 2: So, can I ask you first of all, what were the major cultural, physical, and operational changes you are seeing prepandemic? And has the pandemic accelerated these changes at all?

HILDE VAN WIJINGAARDEN: Well, that's a big question. I couldn't talk about that for an hour. Of course, the library world has changed enormously during the past decades, especially in the last decade of course.

Public libraries are more community supporting libraries. Networking really important in the cities and for people to find a place to get help on any scale. But of course, University libraries really have become involved in support of research and education in a very different way than they were used to. We used to provide information, the books, buy the books, get everything in, and actually now, we hope to get everything out.

Because we are now kind of the facilitators of communicating about our research and the innovation that's happening at universities. And our role has broadened of course, from buying the books and managing study spaces to all kinds of research support tasks and help our researchers and students and teachers to manage their information, to store research data, to share information. And on that sharing, that's where our most important job started to be guardians of open information to organize open access, using fair data to exchange the results of our research. And also, more and more support education, to open up, and share open educational resources.

So libraries have been evolving in that direction. And people often ask me, why does the library do this? Because it's not about a book, it's not about publication, it's about research data. It's about sharing information.

And for me, it's quite natural. Because as librarians, we are good at it. As librarians, we have the competencies to organize, structure, analyze information, and organize the management of data. Of course, with metadata, with archiving, with standards to make data findable, reusable. And that's I think the most important thing that librarians can do.

So when this new job came about, then we took that. Because nobody else did, and because we were good at it. That's good.

And then, of course, the pandemic. It-- we were already used to working digitally. So for us, the main change has been that we-- the first lockdown, we couldn't receive our students in their study spaces. So that was, of course, very difficult not to be able to offer our services there. But almost other services, we could continue with that quite naturally. Because we were already used to give advice on digital collections, on where to get the material that you needed.

But we had to change the way that we work with faculty to support them. We couldn't talk over coffee. But we had to call them, email, and find other online collaboration methods. So that was changing for us. And one very important new development was education going online with much more demand for online educational material.

And with that, it's often difficult for the library to offer the best resources for education. Because it's something that we really have to work on together with publishers that they will offer us better models to provide educational materials for working online and teaching online. But that's-- I think a good thing that we realize how important that is. And that we should move to open educational resources, of course. But also, affordable models to have good educational material.

INTERVIEWER 2: thank you. Is there-- I'm thinking about the sort of hybrid library now. Blended working classes, hybrid library, do you think-- do you think things will go back at all how they were or are we-- is the hybrid in a balance really, the sort of hybrid library?

HILDE VAN WIJINGAARDEN: I think we'll-- at least, us seeing-- we'll see a hybrid working environment that is not specific for libraries. I think people have also found out that there are some benefits in working from home and online. It's not my personal preference. So I say that a little bit skeptical, but there are people that likes to work at home.

So-- and of course, that there are-- we've learned to do it. And we've learned also what could be very useful to do that. Especially, for instance, international collaboration and not travel everywhere all the time, but have quick online meetings. And by doing that, have even more international collaboration. So that that's a good thing.

For libraries, we already have our digital collections. We already had digital services. So not much is changing there. But finding out the importance of the library being there to support our faculty with our digital collections. I think that is really something that will move forward with.

And we've also been learning to be a little bit more flexible with new types of services, new types of media, and supporting also teachers with videos. Not making them specifically, that's not what the library is really good at. But sharing them afterwards, managing them for the future, reusing material, that kind of services we've learned a lot about it, the last two years. So I hope that we'll continue to offer those kind of services.

INTERVIEWER 2: OK. How has-- do you think, how are the shift to digital resources and services how has that affected perceptions of the library by users and the institution?

HILDE VAN WIJINGAARDEN: We have made the shift to completely digital. We can offer completely digital libraries. But people don't know that. Students don't know that.

They just-- they click on Google, and they click on an article. And they think OK, this is just what's out there. And I can use it.

They don't know that the library paid for that. That we are responsible for negotiating with the publishers and having everything available. So-- and if they don't know, it doesn't matter. But I do think that it's an important-- we should be aware that not all information on the internet is OK. And qualified stands for good research.

So that's a big job ahead for us to be sort of-- how do you call that-- to guard our scientific information that's out there. For me, actually, the newest step is to re-evaluate our books. And not because of what's in them. But because of the inspiration that they bring. Bring new value to our books as-- an environment that breathes science and scholarship and as a kind of a decoration in our library study is of course.

But also as something that can offer inspiration that you-- you want to smell it. You want to feel it. And that's rather-- that's kind of new to have that new value to the book. We have everything online. We have everything digital. That's what we should offer. And that's what we're responsible for.

But, at the same time, the books are special as well. And not just the rare books. And because, of course, we have to always keep them and treasure them. But, it's also the book as what it stands for. And the feeling that we have with books. And the book as an object. So that's kind of the newest beyond digital and the newest way that a library wants to work, this, my library.

INTERVIEWER 2: That's really interesting. I've not heard someone say that before. But it's something that I think is wonderful. That's fantastic. Because the physical does have something different, doesn't it?

HILDE VAN WIJINGAARDEN: Yeah. Yeah. And it's difficult to explain what exactly, because people are like, oh, you're going to be an old fashioned library. No. No. I'm not going to be an old fashioned library. I'm-- we're going to look at the different-- the other value that the book brings. I'm not-- I'm a digital librarian. I'm not, but I'm-- originally, I'm an historian. But still, , once I became a librarian, I really was a digital librarian.

I believe that we should offer all the information digitally. And that's the way to go. And we should not collect and get everything inside. Now, we should open up and share everything. But the books more and more, I'm starting to miss them. And maybe, that's also because of the pandemic.

Because we've had been forced to work digital. It's kind of makes you revisit the whole feeling of being in the old fashioned library again. In a place where it feels like you're surrounded by knowledge. That's what we want to feel again.

INTERVIEWER 2: Have you heard any students voice that as well?

HILDE VAN WIJINGAARDEN: Yes. Yes, absolutely. Yes, we-- that's one of our inspirations why we have been starting to with this program that we are going to renovate our library spaces. And we asked students what do you want? What feels like a real library to you? And they said books, art, heritage, plants, green. So that's what we're going to bring them.

We're going to build spaces that they feel surrounded by books. And it doesn't matter which books that are. Because we asked them, OK, if you sit-in between the books that's easy. Because then you can get the book that you want. And they say no, it's not that I need a book. I am studying with my laptop and I'm sitting there. It's not that I need a book, but I want to see a book. And it doesn't matter which book it is.

So just put them out there. But don't be so difficult about cataloging or securing or making that-- just get the books out there and make them visible. But then you can also do more with books. You can also look at the beautiful books and find topics that you want to discuss. Because it's-- the library is not just about individual study. It's also about meeting each other and about debates and about sharing knowledge.

So-- you also want to talk about the books that are there. So that's why we also think OK, we have a bookshelf here. And we ask people to build their own bookshelf. For instance, by what books do you think everybody should read one time in the life? Or we ask a chemistry professor to make a shelf for the history professor. And the other way around.

Or students to make a bookshelf. What's your bookshelf? And then talk about it. So that's the nice community building things that you can do at the library.

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INTERVIEWER 1: We're very grateful to Hilde, Liz, and Greg, for sharing their thoughts with us. And we hope you found these discussions both interesting and thought-provoking. Springer Nature have a suite of resources for librarians at [springernature.com](https://www.springernature.com) Changing Role of the Library, where we cover topics such as leadership in the library, promoting your content, and accessibility, and scholarly communications. Thank you for joining us, and we look forward to sharing further discussions with you in the near future.

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