Memory Institutions Think Tank on the Post-COVID-19 Landscape

Session 1
ENHANCING THE DIGITAL PRESENCE OF GLAMS

Presenter's Discussion Paper

Enhancing the Digital Presence of GLAMs

By Fangmin Wang, Head of Library Information Technology Services, Ryerson University Library

Note: The document provided by the presenter has been modified slightly to make it easier to read on the web. The meaning has not been altered.

The magnitude of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our society is unprecedented. Like other sectors, the GLAM sector has been profoundly affected by the pandemic. According to a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report (2020a), 90% of the world's museums have been temporarily closed during the COVID-19 crisis, and some of these closures may be permanent. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (2020) also reported that libraries around the world have faced severe challenges during the pandemic. As noted by McAndrew (2020) in a survey report, 93% of 795 galleries surveyed temporarily closed their physical locations and one-third of galleries had to downsize during the first half of 2020.

However, GLAMs have shown incredible resilience during the COVID-19 crisis. They have responded to the changing needs of their communities by prioritizing online engagement and services and developing and enhancing their digital presence—all in a very short period of time. Although the growing demand for digital offerings added significant pressures on GLAMs and their employees, it also created an opportunity for GLAMs to rethink their strategic priorities, accelerate their planned digital initiatives and transform their organizations for future success.

Digital offerings during times of crisis

GLAM professionals have expended an extraordinary amount of time and effort to increase and improve digital offerings during the COVID-19 crisis. For example, a survey conducted by the State Library of New South Wales (2020) shows that New South Wales public libraries' online programming jumped from 12% of all programming in pre-COVID times to 86% in 2020.

A wide range of innovative services, programs and digital offerings have been developed by GLAMs around the world, such as online talks, virtual exhibitions, online literacy programming, virtual arts courses, online book reading clubs, online storytelling, virtual literature and culture festivals, virtual information technology training, virtual tours, and online learning games. The resilience and creativity of

GLAM professionals are fundamental to the development of all these remarkable digital programs and services.

In addition to improving their website presence to prioritize online services and programs during the pandemic, GLAMs have increased their social media activities significantly. Social media platforms and communication tools like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube, SoundCloud, Zoom, Google Meet and Microsoft Teams have been heavily used by GLAMs to stay connected with their user communities. Live streaming via Facebook, audio distribution via Soundcloud, broadcasting videos via YouTube, and holding virtual meetings via Zoom have been widely adopted by GLAMs for online engagement. A good example is Italy's GAMeC (Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art), which created the online radio show "Radio GAMeC," about news, art, literature and society. This project was cited by UNESCO as one of the best museum initiatives born during the lockdown (GAMeC 2020).

Some museums and galleries have taken advantage of the opportunity and experimented with new ideas involving emerging technologies. For instance, a telepresence robot now provides virtual tours at the Hastings Contemporary Gallery, in England. Visitors can stay at home and follow the tours of the gallery by connecting to the robot through their own digital devices (Dickson 2020). New forms of museum experience have emerged as well, including the immersive experience. "Go Beyond the Walls" is a virtual reality experience created by the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Parts of the museum collections were made available for this immersive and interactive virtual museum experience (Smithsonian American Art Museum 2020).

Since the rise of the Internet, in the late 90s, making collections and information services available to users online has become a top priority for libraries. In fact, academic libraries are already spending the majority of their collection budgets on digital content (Enis 2018). Many library online services actually have existed for years; the COVID-19 crisis simply made them much more visible. Most libraries in North America were actually much better equipped to provide online content and services than many of their users realized (Harvey 2020). Whether it was through an ebook lending service, such as OverDrive, or a video streaming service, such as Kanopy or Hoopla, Canadian public libraries saw a dramatic increase in usage for their digital collections and services during the closures of their physical libraries (Klingbeil 2020).

Libraries' efforts went beyond the provision of access to digital collections, however. My own library is one example. The Ryerson University Library was much better positioned than other units on campus to shift its programs and services online when the initial lockdown started. Even prior to the lockdown, its digital course readings were embedded with thousands of courses and its online catalogue and academic search service were available to students and faculty 24 hours a day, every day. The volume of virtual reference service doubled over the course of the summer in 2020, and the diverse webinars and virtual programming offered by the library have been extremely popular since the start of the pandemic. The library even used a courier service to deliver hundreds of laptops and WiFi hotspots to students to support online learning. Like other academic libraries, the Ryerson University Library introduced "contactless print pickup and scan-and-deliver services" for students and faculty who wanted to borrow physical materials (Smyth 2020). Who said the library was closed during the pandemic?

As UNESCO (2020b) stated, "Turning the threat of COVID-19 into an opportunity for greater support to documentary heritage," archivists across Canada stepped up and played an important role in capturing the history and preserving materials about the COVID-19 crisis. New approaches such as crowdsourcing

and web archiving have been embraced by community-driven archival projects. Through an online submission form, the Brock University Archives used a living history model to collect stories around the COVID-19 crisis from residents of the Niagara region (Cadloff 2020). Using the Archive-It platform provided by the Internet Archives, the records management and archives team at Concordia University Library launched its COVID-19 web archiving initiative to collect news and stories related to the university and its community's reaction and response to the COVID-19 crisis (Richan 2020).

There is no shortage of inspiring stories and creative digital initiatives from GLAMs during this extraordinary time. However, GLAMs—especially small organizations—are still facing many challenges in terms of their digital capacity.

Small organizations and digital capacity building

There is a wide discrepancy between GLAMs in terms of organizational size and digital capacity. Delivering online programming can be more challenging than in-person services as it requires new skills or talents. On one hand, leveraging digital solutions can create new opportunities for small GLAMs. For example, using social media for community engagement can be very effective, and online collaboration can be relatively inexpensive and fast. On the other hand, the acceleration of the digital shift has inevitably resulted in significant challenges for small GLAMs as many of them already lack capacity to make a successful transition. Research by Finnis and Kennedy (2020) shows that the gaps in the digital skills of small GLAMs are acute.

According to a survey of museums and galleries on the impact of COVID-19 conducted by Art Fund (2020), "[d]igital opportunities are immense and the vast majority (86%) of organizations have increased their online presence; but digital resources and expertise are patchy, and many museums are left behind." Art Fund (2020) also found that "[t]here are gaps in the provision of training and development opportunities in the sector, particularly for a hub of information on existing resources. 68% of staff and 77% of directors were interested in support for free online training and skills development." In her report *Building Digital Leadership and Resilience in the UK's Cultural Sector*, Gorton (2016) stated that "[t]he expensive part of digital transformation is investing in people, not technology. It's this investment which enables the development of digital skills and capacity, and provides the time needed to test and shape digital projects."

Increasing professional development opportunities and access to digital expertise are key to GLAMs improving digital capacity. Although staff and management have clearly demonstrated their interest in developing digital skills, GLAMs would benefit from working together to create a network of expertise and sharing best practices. This would allow small GLAMs to leverage a larger network and improve their digital capacity.

Library Carpentry is a great example of such a digital skills development initiative. This community-driven initiative is maintained by volunteers. Its goal is to build software and data skills among library and information professionals (Library Carpentry 2020).

Collaboration and partnership

There are many creative and hardworking people in the GLAMs sector. However, we all have finite institutional resources and capacities. This is why collaboration and partnerships are so important in order for GLAMs to be able to scale up digital offerings and develop new initiatives.

The "Ask a Librarian" initiative is a good example of how organizations can come together to offer high-quality services to their communities. This collaborative virtual research assistance service offered via real-time chat is supported by Scholars Portal, a digital service unit of the Ontario Council of University Libraries (OCUL). "Ask a Librarian" currently has 17 participating academic libraries as service operating members. This translates into hundreds of library professionals working together to provide research support through a centralized chat platform (Scholars Portal 2020). This service has been essential to students and faculty seeking assistance from their libraries during the lockdown. This collaboration enables each member library to offer extended hours and services to their own user community.

For many GLAMs, it is challenging enough to maintain their existing programs and services during the pandemic, let alone think ahead and start new digital initiatives. Strengthening the connection and collaboration among GLAMs, as well as between GLAMs and outside organizations, will bring new opportunities. After all, we all have a limited number of digital talents within our own organizations.

Allow me to provide an example from my personal experience. In 2019, the Aga Khan Museum approached Ryerson University to become a partner in an exploratory research project funded by the Canada Council for the Arts. Led by the Ryerson University Library, an interdisciplinary Ryerson project team consisting of library staff, faculty advisors and graduate students provided expertise for the digital experimentation component. Combining the strengths of the two organizations, this collaborative research project has produced amazing prototypes allowing the Aga Khan Museum to explore the possibilities for providing an interactive digital museum experience (Ryerson University Library 2020).

The success of this research partnership led to further collaboration between these two institutions, on the Remastered Exhibition, a special project developed and launched during the pandemic for the purpose of celebrating the ability of the human spirit to overcome adversity. The holographic displays used in the exhibition were supported by an industry partner, Looking Glass Factory, a leading hologram technology company. This project is considered one of the most innovative and most vividly immersive exhibitions of Islamic manuscript paintings (Chagnon 2020). As part of the project team, I have learned how critical the role of interdisciplinary collaborations and cross-organizational partnerships is to the digital innovation taking place within GLAMs.

GLAMs in a post-COVID-19 world

Although we are starting to see the light at the end of the tunnel as vaccines are being rolled out, there will still be plenty of uncertainties associated with living in a post-COVID-19 world. It also remains to be seen how moving towards virtual services will impact the revenue sources of GLAMs. As Grynsztejn (2020) points out, "[t]he museum we closed will not be the same as the one we will open." It is hard to predict the future, but this fact does not prevent us from improving our ability to be more adaptable in a fast-changing environment. Here are a few digital trends and development areas that I think will be important for GLAMs to take into consideration in a post-COVID-19 world.

- A socially distanced experience will stay with GLAMs for quite a while. Many online programs and services created during the COVID-19 crisis will continue to be important, and a long-term digital strategy plan will become a top priority for GLAMs.

- GLAMs need to step up and position themselves as trusted digital content providers. As we face an increasing amount of fake news originating from social media, GLAMs have a social responsibility to fight against harmful narratives and to disseminate truthful information and fair historical perspectives to their communities.

- Physical spaces and collections will continue to be an important part of the future success of GLAMs, but focusing on integration with digital presence and solutions as well as digital marketing will become vital. Digitization of collections will speed up.

- Although many GLAMs have successfully achieved online engagement with their communities, a hybrid model of providing user-centered programming and services both in person and online will be necessary going forward. A hybrid model will enable GLAMs to reach out to broader communities.

- Issues surrounding the lack of digital talents and resources will not be easily resolved. Building long-term digital capacity and providing staff with more professional development opportunities will be top priorities for leaders of GLAMs.

- Collaborations and partnerships will be even more important in a post-COVID-19 world for GLAMs in order to pool resources, scale up digital offerings and tackle the challenges the sector is facing.

- Emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), virtual reality, augmented reality, and 3D visualization present tremendous opportunities for the digital future of GLAMs. Digitized and born-digital collections have made it possible for collections to be treated as data. Sitting on a tremendous amount of quality data, GLAMs have the potential to lead in digital innovation. The question remains how new technologies can be leveraged to unleash the untapped value of GLAMs. Ongoing efforts in research and development need to be supported. GLAMs could increase their digital innovation capability through collaboration with research institutions and industry partners.

- Creating a culture that encourages experimentation and prototyping will be key to growing innovative digital initiatives. Some GLAMs may be interested in the idea of "Open a GLAM Lab" to explore new ways of meeting the demands of digital content users (Dobreva 2020).

- Measuring the impact of GLAMs will need to emphasize digital content, programs and services more than ever (e.g., digital attendance and virtual visits). Virtual GLAMs experience and online engagement will be as important as onsite experiences. Data analytics and visualization will become important to assist with evaluating user experience and community engagement.

- More digital-oriented programs related to EDI (Equity, Diversity and Inclusion) and Indigenization should be introduced. They can help GLAMs expand their outreach to groups that may have not been actively engaged in the past.

- The COVID-19 crisis has intensified the digital divide in society (Stewart 2020). GLAMs can play a more important role in providing support to vulnerable groups that lack access to digital technology, digital skills and digital literacy learning opportunities.

- GLAMs should take advantage of the opportunities provided by the open access movement. We have already learned how open access to scientific data has accelerated the research related to COVID-19. Openly licensed cultural content provides immense benefits to education, research and society ("Getting Started for GLAMs," n.d.). Why not start participating in initiatives like GLAM Wiki to make open-access and freely reusable content available to a global online audience?

The COVID-19 crisis has accelerated the creation of digital offerings and the adoption of digital technology in GLAMs. These trends will not be limited to the short term and will reshape GLAMs in the long term. All the great work and initiatives carried out by GLAMs around the world during the pandemic should give us confidence in the future of the GLAM sector in a post-COVID-19 world. The roles of librarians, archivists and curators are critical to the digital transformation of our organizations. However, we will need to continue to acquire new skills and be open to new possibilities. We must expand our network for collaboration and knowledge sharing within the GLAM sector and beyond. Together, we will be much stronger to tackle the unknown challenges that lie ahead.

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