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

Session 2

DEMONSTRATING THE RELEVANCE OF GLAMS IN A CRISIS CONTEXT— BUILDING CAPACITY AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Presenter's Discussion Paper

Building Capacity at the Local Level

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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.

Background

During the pandemic, local GLAM institutions (galleries, libraries, archives and museums) have struggled to adapt to the new reality imposed by physical distancing, restrictions on business activities, staff layoffs and declining revenues. Some institutions were forced to close down completely due to insufficient resources and lack of capacity to transition to online services. Others have been able to find creative solutions to overcome some of the restrictions and have ventured into new areas of community support. We know that local GLAM institutions can serve their communities in unique ways in times of crisis. How can we enable them to continue their important work in such "circumstances"?

These preliminary thoughts and observations are those of a librarian and archivist who has worked in the heritage and academic communities for the past 15 years. While I will not directly address the specific realities of GLAMs, I believe that these realities have much in common and in many ways transcend our disciplinary boundaries and specificities. I hope that

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this exploratory paper, although preliminary, will spark ideas for discussion and fuel your thoughts for our exchange.

1. Serving Communities in Times of Crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic has been and continues to be an unprecedented challenge to the GLAM community around the world. However, it was not the first challenge to disrupt our institutions. We need only think of the arrival of the Internet or the personal computer, or even more recently, smart phones. These technological innovations have changed the very foundations of our institutions. GLAMs, particularly libraries, have often been spaces for the development and testing of new services and resources, both in the academic and public sectors. In my opinion, this spirit of innovation and adaptability is one of the reasons why our community has been able to respond to this health crisis.

How can we continue to serve our users and communities when health regulations force us to close our spaces and work remotely? Can our GLAMs exist outside their walls? What are and what will be the needs of our users in these times of crisis? Will our staff have enough work? Will we have to downsize? Are we essential? What roles should we play, and how?

In recent months, I have seen a variety of activities in response to the crisis, mainly in the university library community. I can divide these into three areas: access to information, communication with clients, and the importance of developing digital solidarity. Here are a few examples.

1.1. Providing access to information and information resources

1.1.1. Reviewing acquisition priorities to favour digital resources (e-books, database access, etc.)
1.1.2. Presenting and showcasing reliable information sources to counter widespread disinformation about the pandemic
1.1.3. Providing live or asynchronous online training

1.2. Maintaining contact with various client groups

1.2.1. Maintaining contact with isolated or vulnerable clients
    1.2.1.1. Ending home lending, delivery and reading services to seniors (for health reasons), replaced by reading sessions over the telephone
    1.2.1.2. Providing online reference services by appointment (research assistance); emphasizing the librarian's key role as moral support

1.2.2. Developing a community support network using existing social media tools (Facebook, Instagram, institution's website); making it known to everyone and using external tools (Audible, Libby, Overdrive, Hoopla, etc.)

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1.2.3. Showcasing documentary resources; inviting writers and artists to present their work on the institution's YouTube channel (development of online programming)

1.3. Developing digital solidarity

1.3.1. Providing free access to selected television programs and movies as well as programming for children, parents and students
1.3.2. Offering free Wi-Fi in parking lots and places near the library; creating local free Internet signal distribution networks from (unused) GLAM equipment
1.3.3. Providing free online subscriptions to all kinds of resources, chats, enhanced FAQs
1.3.4. Loaning technology equipment free of charge
1.3.5. Developing partnerships with local and national stakeholders in the public and private sectors

2. Supporting GLAM Institutions in Times of Crisis

COVID-19 has had a major impact on people and society, especially those directly affected by the disease. Increasingly, the media and public health authorities are referring to post-traumatic stress disorder to describe the level of stress and distress in the public.

2.1. Impacts of COVID-19: Stress, anxiety, mental health and working remotely

Stress, anxiety and mental health issues are not new to workplaces, but the pandemic has exacerbated all of these problems. So what should we do? How do we manage our teams in a crisis situation? How do we provide services to our clients in this context? How do we communicate with them? While some institutions have been able to put in place positive initiatives (specialized training sessions, individual coaching, flexible working arrangements, etc.), the fact remains that this situation is mostly beyond our control. The new regulatory framework issued and modified almost weekly for several months contributes in part to maintaining this generalized state of stress in the general public. As a society, will we be able to redefine the post-COVID-19 workplace?

2.2. On site …

GLAM institutions are embodied in the occupation of a physical, often iconic place. This place is as essential to their definition as are their collections and the services they offer. What will happen to these places when "normalcy" returns? Will the occupation of these places return to what it was before? Will the public still be present? In what way? Will there be more patrons or fewer? Will our users be the same? What experience will our users be looking for when they visit? In developing our new virtual identity so quickly, do we risk losing our

"physical" identity? Should our accelerated digital transformation not be accompanied by a reflection on the transformation of our spaces?

2.3. Prospects

For a number of reasons, it is highly likely that we will now be talking about our profession and our society in terms of pre-COVID-19 and post-COVID-19. This health crisis has revealed many weaknesses in our society on several levels. Inevitably, this crisis will lead to many changes within GLAM institutions. How will we organize our work processes? How will we address occupational health issues for our employees and our users? How will working remotely affect the interaction between our public service teams and our clients?

While the initiatives resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic tend to demonstrate a very real, even essential, need for our services, they also tend to demonstrate the important role that our institutions can play at the local level. This role based on proximity cannot be played by others. What if community support were to be achieved through greater collaboration between our institutions, through greater "interconnectivity"? What if thinking globally allowed us to act better at the local level?

Part of the answers to these questions lies in recognizing the essential character of GLAM institutions in democratic societies, not only as defenders and promoters of the values of those societies but also as shelters in times of crisis.

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