

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

Session 4

THE SOCIAL VALUE OF GLAMS IN A POST-COVID-19 LANDSCAPE

Presenter's Discussion Paper

The Social Value of GLAMs in a Post-COVID-19 Landscape

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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.

The impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic very quickly developed into an international crisis, on a scale not seen since the Second World War. Almost simultaneously in most countries across the globe, the crisis disrupted aspects of the daily lives of individuals and the business of government:

- In a globalized world, most nations suffered an immediate hit to their economies, as supply lines were cut and panic buying of certain goods outstripped the capacity of retailers.
- International and domestic travel was restricted, often by means of rapidly changing regimes that created further uncertainty and confusion across communities.
- The imposition of social distancing and quarantining of persons at risk disrupted families and close-knit social groups.
- The pandemic all but completely consumed governments, media and public discourse.

The profound disruption to the business and government of the nation also had a secondary effect, also with severe consequences. This environment proved to be fertile ground for the spread of misinformation (where false information is inadvertently spread by a community) and disinformation (the deliberate and calculated promulgation of false and misleading information).

In understanding why this occurred, it is informative to note that research by the Lowy Institute in 2020 identified the following preconditions for disinformation:

- a large, connected online community of interest, which provides a network effect, spreading disinformation far and fast;
- a population sufficiently distrustful of authority, including politicians and mainstream media; and
- situations of high anxiety and low certainty, which are conducive to the spread of both disinformation (deliberative, by malicious actors) and misinformation (uncoordinated, by well-meaning actors unwittingly spreading false hope).

Notably, the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified these conditions, because the crisis has evolved in unexpected ways over time, unlike emergencies triggered by a sudden event such as a terrorist attack, mass shooting or large-scale disaster.

How does COVID relate to the social function of archives?

As we witness the combined effects of the social disruption resulting from the pandemic and the erosion of social harmony fuelled by disinformation, GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives and museums) institutions, or GLAMs—and in particular archives—we are reminded of our basic roles and responsibilities and the value that we contribute:

- The pandemic has underscored the importance of collective memory in facing national and transnational challenges, with perhaps the painful realization that our organizations do not possess adequate records of past pandemics;
- Twenty-first-century society operates largely in the digital world, with privately owned social media companies carrying the majority of information that influences public opinion. This heightens vulnerability to disinformation, and imposes a greater responsibility on memory institutions to supply readily discoverable and accessible information that can inform and balance public discourse.
- National resilience and social cohesion come from culture and identity. While governments across the world urgently focus on public health and economic recovery, GLAMs must redouble our efforts to ensure that the return to health and financial prosperity is matched by a shared cultural prosperity. These are the foundations of an inclusive, just and harmonious civil society.

Our COVID response

Across the world, archival institutions have adjusted their service delivery methods, remaining connected to the communities we serve in an environment of social distancing and physical isolation. The most obvious and widespread change is the uptake of digital channels to keep archives accessible to all. Beyond that, however, there have also been campaigns to keep the existence and the value of archives alive in the minds of the broader community, as we draw on our collections to remind communities that we can survive these crises.

As well as providing access to the memories of the past, GLAMs have also to look to the future and ensure that the experience of COVID is adequately captured to inform future generations. During the pandemic, the International Council on Archives (ICA) has worked closely with the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and other like-minded organizations to produce two published statements highlighting the role of documentary heritage in the response to the pandemic, and the importance of documenting the actions and decisions now being taken. These statements, available through the ICA and UNESCO websites, are the following:

- ‘Turning the threat of COVID-19 into an opportunity for greater support to documentary heritage’ and
- ‘COVID-19: The duty to document does not cease in a crisis, it becomes more essential’.

Several countries have already issued orders for meticulous preservation of official records related to the pandemic. This not only underlines the gravity of the current situation, but also highlights the importance of memory institutions in providing the records or information management resources necessary for understanding, contextualizing and overcoming such crises in the future.

At the same time, records of humanity’s artistic and creative expressions, which form a vital part of documentary heritage, are a source of social connectivity and resilience for communities worldwide.

Looking ahead: GLAMS in the post-pandemic world

The experience of the pandemic has elevated the importance to society of ‘trust’ and ‘truth’. Individuals need to know whom they can *trust* in order to find the *truth*. To my mind, GLAM institutions have a unique and irreplaceable role in meeting this need.

In a world of hyper-connectivity with an abundance of disinformation, GLAMs stand out as the institutions that can be trusted to help individuals discover the truth. GLAMs uphold access to knowledge, freedom of expression, protection of rights and entitlements, celebration of diversity, integrity of public administration. While I don’t believe any GLAM institution should claim to be the keeper of incontestable truth, the provision of trusted information and services affords all citizens the best opportunity to re-appraise their own worldview and their journey to the truth.

This is the core value that the international community should be reasserting most forcefully as the world emerges from the COVID-19 crisis.