

Digital Expansion and Leadership in Pandemic Times:

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The Covid-19 pandemic was declared a global public health crisis in March 2020. The pandemic affects every element of our lives. The entire education sector was taken by surprise.

Universities closed with little warning. Library and archival services had to be moved online.

Lockdown of physical buildings meant limited or no access to printed materials. Closings were called temporary, but few libraries or archives were able to serve their publics. Lockdowns have had spillover effects. Bookstores have closed and the print industry has been severely impacted.

Publishers and libraries had to make difficult decisions, laying off employees due to uncertain government funding, and slashed state revenues. In these conditions, access to digitized collections has become more important than ever. Digitized collections became crucial for scholars, educators, and students to be able to continue their work. Managers of archives undertook unprecedented steps to meet users' needs.

In higher education, the situation has been especially severe. Many fields in the humanities and area studies still depend on printed books—my own field of area studies in particular. Not every country produces or has access to electronic textbooks, ebooks, and digitized scholarly published materials. Many countries publish printed books and journals alone, in languages other than English. Researchers who work on topics like area studies find themselves in a challenging situation: the materials we need are in print alone, and libraries are shut down. This lack of direct access to printed materials, and the shuttering of every school, university, and institute is a significant roadblock for students and educators during the pandemic. We are all familiar with this kind of announcement: “Unfortunately, none of the physical items in the collection, including books, journals, and videos, will be available for loan until further notice.” Behind that announcement lies a severe crisis for learning and the production of knowledge, and some opportunities as well.

Libraries' Digital Expansion and Decision-Making Leadership

All of this provided a challenge for decision-makers in the information field. Since the Covid-19 lockdown, administrators found themselves thrust into an important decision-making position. Step by step, they decided to open their institutes' digital collections to help their constituencies. Along the way, they opened their collections to users around the world. In just one example, [HealthTrust Digital Library](#) digitized old and new materials and removed temporary restrictions on some of their materials.

Today, many digital and open-access resources are available to scholars unable to travel to use archives due to the pandemic. For example, [the British National Archives](#) has allowed users to digitally borrow up to 50 items for 30 days until their site at Kew reopens. Individual registration is required, but nothing else. The Paris Art Museums have allowed access to 100k images of works held at 14 museums in Paris. [The Francophone Press](#) in Egypt digitized their collection of twentieth-century materials. This is the most comprehensively digitized collection of historical publishing on and in Egypt between 1844 and 1985—now completely available online. Doctoral

students have also opened their fieldwork digital collections from the archives and publish materials online for others to use. Here, see for example, from Spain's colonial archives [a digital collection of the history of Fernando Po and the bight Biafra](#) by Enrique Martino. Public libraries have also taken a leading role in helping their users. Some provided needed resources such as computers, Wi-Fi, and access to digital materials even when facing budget cuts and limited access to funding for these new initiatives.

Digital technology, Digital libraries, and the challenges ahead

Scholars and students need access to books, manuscripts, musical scores, photographs, graphic materials, moving images, and more. This access is not a luxury—it is essential. Digital technology allows us to provide that access at any time and from any location. Digital libraries are not new. They emerged during the 1990s. Now in our third decade of digitization, we still face challenges in meeting users' needs even as we strive to keep current with continuous software and hardware changes. In the face of all these challenges, collaboration has become essential. To ensure successful collaboration, we need to think of long-term partnerships.

One excellent example of collaboration and partnership building is The [World Digital Library \(WDL\)](#), which allows people to browse its collection built from 134 partner institutions in 51 countries; peruse interactive maps and timelines in Chinese books, manuscripts, and maps; learn about Imperial Russia and other aspects of world history, and much more. The WDL was created by [The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization \(UNESCO\)](#) and managed by the Library of Congress. The goal of WDL was to assist libraries in building capacity through partner institutes and to create a new standard for digitization and preservation of cultural heritage, accessible to all for free. The WDL answered unspoken dreams of researchers and ordinary people to access a vast multidisciplinary digital library with multi-lingual materials.

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to a shift in our approach to those library materials. Scientists found early on that the Covid-19 virus lives on metal surfaces for five days, on wood for four days, and on cardboard for 24 hours. During the 1918 influenza pandemic, materials kept in the homes of affected people were destroyed to prevent the spread of disease. What will we do today? How can we avoid destruction of materials to help prevent further spread of the virus? In light of all this, the importance of thinking digitally is clear.

Technology solves many problems here and it allows small and large institutes to digitize their materials. But decision-makers face huge new problems in turn. The cost of preservation and digitizing materials is far from trivial at a time of vast budget cuts. This challenge, too, can be addressed by creating partnerships with local, national, and international groups to share tasks and costs. Support for these projects should be seen as a public good. Libraries provide essential social infrastructure for all of society. Digital libraries provide benefits far beyond the world of researchers and students. They help all kinds of users work from any location. Libraries are providing Wi-Fi access to people around the world under lockdown due to Covid-19.

Responsibilities of Decision-makers

Given all these achievements, what remains to be done? Looking forward, there is still a great deal for us to do. Decision-makers in the field of information need to continue to act and collaborate, to create and maintain partnerships, to digitize libraries, and to archive collections to serve their communities and to preserve cultural heritage for the future. We need to work with our technical people to update systems and establish new digital capabilities. Around the world, decision-makers need to constantly review previous plans and to provide visionary thinking about how to move forward. We need to think ahead. Flexibility and speed will be key. Covid-19 has put outdated models to the test. The shift to digital moved from a dream to a necessity. How we address this necessity in the phase to come will shape the world in which we learn, teach, work. We will find new ways to remember where we come from as we consider where we are going in the crucial years to come.