

The Plot Thickens: Impact of a Covid-19 shutdown on a specialist screen and broadcast library and the issues with moving toward an online environment

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Abstract: This paper examines the issues surrounding the closure of a specialist library during the Covid-19 pandemic. The methodology used to gather data was a qualitative survey of 5 library staff members. The results of the survey highlighted the personal and professional challenges each staff member faced and the ways those challenges were overcome to maintain a high standard of library service. The move toward online services and digital lending material is picking up speed, and the library can now offer a vast range of material and services remotely. Looking to the future, the face-to-face nature of the screen and broadcast library service may be challenged while how to manage lending services for the physical collection and maintaining the unique visual experience for users will be barriers to overcome.

Keywords: Covid-19, virtual library, digital library, ebook,

1. Introduction

The Jerzy Toeplitz Library (JTL) underwent a procedural overhaul during the Covid-19 shutdown, one which had a large effect on the practices of its librarians. This paper examines the impacts of the shutdown to the library staff. Furthermore, it discusses how the challenges were overcome, including the use of virtual communication tools, which are now integral for connecting with the JTL's users and how user connection was at the forefront of decision making during the shutdown. Next, the discussion outlines how the online chat feature, the online meeting tool Zoom, and the social media platforms all moved to the foreground of the JTL communication strategy. Finally, the paper discusses the shift from a physical space which has always been and will remain an important part of the JTL, to an online arena and how this online space now runs parallel to it, enhancing the physical space and even, as has been the case during the shutdown, become the main space of the JTL.

2. Description of the Jerzy Toeplitz Library

The Jerzy Toeplitz Library, established in 1973, is a specialist library for the screen arts and broadcasting industries. Situated within the Australian Film,

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Television and Radio School (AFTRS), Australia's premier screen and broadcast school, it supports teaching staff, students, and industry professionals. On-site, the library holds over 44,000 items, including over 18,000 DVDs, Blu-rays and VHS tapes, 20,000 books and eBooks, 3,000 film and television scripts and screenplays. Online, there are over 75,000 streaming videos. In addition to being a place for quiet study, the library hosts educational workshops, public talks, and film screenings. The Library provides extensive academic support to students teaching information access skills, offering research assistance and research consultations and assessment support.

As well as a learning support library, the JTL is a visual space that connects with its users using topical displays, exhibits and signage. Prior to the shutdown, each time a new major display was unveiled users would visit the library to see the latest grand design – to marvel at the creative works and the messages behind the drama. The User Experience Librarian says of the displays, "I like to think of our "Curated Collection" as more akin to art installations than what you often see display-wise in your local library. They involve not just an aesthetic vision and laborious time-intensive prop making, but also knowledge and passion for film culture that translates into a kind-of visual feast and conversation piece for the viewer. As each display is themed, the library resources that are highlighted must reflect the theme so I like to include an eclectic mix of well-known favourites, forgotten classics, and more obscure art films, television series', books and soundtracks. Both the visual and the material elements aim to educate and entertain our users and the high level of engagements we achieve with every new display has transformed the library into a hub of creatively-minded individuals who champion and anticipate our events and activities."

3. Timeline of events for Covid-19 Shutdown

- On March 11, 2020 a national pandemic was announced.
- From March 16, 2020 the Jerzy Toeplitz Library was closed to the public, and users were informed via SMS and email. It was still open to staff and students.
- On March 19, 2020 AFTRS conducted a work-from-home trial.
- From March 23, 2020 staff members working in the library was limited to 1. The library was still open to AFTRS staff and students but limited to 10 people within the library.
- On March 31, 2020 it was advised that the library would be closed from April 1, which coincided with the entire building being shut down.
- On April 1, 2020 staff began to create the Virtual Library.
- Three days later, on April 3, 2020 the Virtual Library went live on the

library website.

4. Methodology

A mixed-method approach was used to collect the information for this paper. A qualitative survey, quantitative data analysis and individual interviews were undertaken. A qualitative survey was conducted to examine the effects on library staff, including their feelings surrounding the pandemic and the challenges they faced when the physical library shut its doors and services moved online. The survey consisted of 7 open-ended questions and 3 close-ended questions to determine the thoughts and feelings of library staff. The questions asked staff how they had felt initially when they heard about the shutdown and asked them to share their experiences since working from home. System generated data was used to analyse the usage of eBooks and online databases and analyse user demand and the library response to a shift to online customer service. Two individual interviews took place, one with the User Experience Librarian and one with the Acquisitions Librarian to discuss the future interaction with the physical library, the library's current and future online presence.

5. Effects of Covid-19 shutdown on Library staff

The Jerzy Toeplitz Library has a total of six full and part-time staff members. Five staff members completed a qualitative survey. The survey aimed to gain insight into staff reactions to the shutdown. The series of closed and open-ended questions were designed to uncover how library staff felt about the Covid-19 shutdown, the challenges that they have faced in relation to their roles within the library and their feelings about looking to the future and re-entering the library.

When asked to describe their initial reaction to the shutdown, staff members described a feeling of relief. One staff member states, “[I was] relieved for my safety,” and another states, “Relieved. We knew it was going to happen but were in limbo waiting for the official word.” Others mentioned a feeling of anxiousness regarding change of circumstance and job security. “I was concerned about job security and anxious over change and uncertainty.”

When asked about the reactions from users, the staff stated ‘mostly supportive’ and occasional annoyance regarding the degree of access to resources as common responses from users. One staff member stated, “feedback was initially of concern about the general welfare of everyone. This changed as users became concerned about their access to resources.” Another staff member said, “there was anxiety among some lecturing staff and students about accessing materials. The closure happened fast with little warning to either library staff or users. Though most people seemed supportive during the process.”

All staff stated that they faced challenges specific to their role in the library while working from home. From the answers given, customer engagement, supplying specific online resources and demands for service were listed as challenges.

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Staff stated the creation of a virtual library, reallocation of budget to accommodate more online resources, online communication tools and focused customer services as ways challenges were overcome.

All staff answered yes to continuing one or more procedures that were implemented due to the shutdown, listing the virtual library, online chat, online meetings and working from home as procedures they wished to continue.

4 out of 5 staff has concerns about returning to the physical library. Of that 4, 1 was concerned for the library if we did not go back, while 3 staff members stated worries about maintaining social distancing and changes to colleague interactions. When asked to measure the importance of a return to a physical space, 1 respondent stated that it was very important to return to the library, noting that face-to-face contact is an important part of the library community and access to the physical collection as the main reasons. 1 respondent believed it was moderately important to return to the library and 3 staff believed it was slightly important to return to the library.

6. Challenges faced by staff as a result of the library closure and how they were overcome

6.1 The need for online resources and the creation of the Virtual Library

Historically, the JTL uses face-to-face methods of communication and support. The AFTRS operates as a hands-on learning environment, and the library has followed that regime. As noted above, it holds many physical items unavailable digitally. Additionally, library practices and procedures all orbited around users being physically present in the library. For example, picking up items on hold from a librarian in person, being encouraged to approach library staff in person with questions and queries as there was no online chat option available. Also, users frequented the library to borrow items, many of which were only available as hard copies. Once working from home, the library staff had to implement new procedures for users to access material and be given the level of service to which they were accustomed.

The JTL's staff experienced a sudden transition from working in the physical library to working from home. Although staff state they were aware of the situation - from watching media coverage and reading the advice received from AFTRS' Human Resources department, recommending staff to work from home - when the library did close its doors, it was a decision that happened overnight. As a result of the rapid developments of Covid-19, the library staff had limited time to think about their workflow procedures and what that would look like from their home offices. 3 major challenges arose.

First, library staff had to quickly adapt to an online interface and transfer chiefly face-to-face services to online services. A number of academic skills presentations were set to be delivered in person, along with face-to-face

research consultations, plus most reference queries and borrowing of resources were provided in person through walk-ins to the physical library. Therefore, the library ideology and library staff ethos surrounding academic support and assisting staff and students with obtaining resources was challenged. The library staff had to develop ways to teach and support users without being physically present and develop communications with users online, in real time.

On March 30, 2020, the Library Supervisor created a digital LibGuide linking the current digital resources to a central location on the library website. It was named the Virtual Library. In this virtual space, users can view exactly the resources accessible remotely. The list included eBooks, streaming audio-visual services, journals, and article databases. The virtual library also included virtual tours and entertainment, such as streaming to zoo tours, virtual roller-coaster experiences and tours of international tourism sites (e.g. Stonehenge). “We needed an online space that still felt like a library in the way that all the resources are available to you in the one location. It needed to be easy to navigate, and we needed to ensure the staff and students had access to enough resources to continue their work,” Library Supervisor.

Once digital access to teaching materials was established, the next action was to ensure users had a direct and instant way to communicate with library staff. Without the immediacy of face-to-face contact, staff needed to use online communication tools to speak with users, ensuring queries were answered, as well as maintaining engagement levels. The most efficient method used to answer remote questions and queries is with an instant online chat system. As there was no previous chat system in place, an appropriate system had to be sought out and purchased, and staff members had to be trained in software in a few days. The software purchased and installed was called LibAnswers by Spring Share. Once it was installed, within a week, an email alert was sent out to all users explaining where they could find the chat function and encouraged users to engage with the library online. The focus was to ensure that the library staff was available to maintain a high standard of service and support. With LibAnswers software installed, the library has created a streamlined method for all users to get immediate access to a librarian. Furthermore, staff now have access to a reference analytics component enabling the recording of superior and detailed reference statistics. All surveyed staff members stated the online chat as a procedure they recommended continuing after the shutdown period ceased. Out of a reaction to a crisis, a positive step forward for the library emerged.

6.2 Staying connected with users in the virtual space

As a teaching environment, it was vital that the students continued to feel supported in their learning and that they still had an adequate level of assistance and access to resources.

In addition to the online chat service, the library continued to use email as a

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blanket method of communicating with its users. Major announcements and procedural changes were announced using the group email. The email continues to be the primary mode of online correspondence, including the regular weekly newsletter. While email is a useful tool for conveying information about the library, it lacks the immediacy of other online communication platforms. To gain the immediacy, along with the chat function, library staff began to use online communication tool, Zoom, to meet between themselves as well as liaise with other AFTRS staff and provide consultations to students.

It was a priority to continue providing academic support throughout the lockdown period. During a time when students may have felt disconnected and lose track of their studies, it was imperative that library staff could maintain contact. The Library supervisor, along with two Curriculum Liaison Librarians worked to provide constant reassurance and support via online gateways. This was achieved by filming library staff discussing the changes – putting faces to the information was a way to connect to the users and ensure that staff were still engaged and present. All face-to-face academic research skills presentations were shifted to real time Zoom presentations or recorded presentations that users could catch up on in their own time. While this was received with enthusiasm by staff and students and the teaching content became readily available to the students even while they were off-campus, immediate issues became apparent. Screensharing multiple screens at a time was awkward. Transitioning from a PowerPoint presentation to a website, to a WORD document entailed a stop start scenario, which meant it was difficult to sustain a focused presentation and engagement was hard to maintain. While screensharing, the presenter cannot see the students, therefore it can be unclear if they connect with the content. Participant sharing – the presenter was often invited to the meeting themselves and had often not been the original host of the meeting, therefore the audience was left waiting while permissions were assigned to the presenter. Breaks in the presentations because of these technical issues were distracting.

With the cessation of all physical library displays, staff had to create virtual landscapes to interact and remain relevant, spaces where users could still engage with the displayed content. The upcoming challenge is how to move those elaborate displays into a digital arena. “The next Curated Collection will be about the idea of “Sleep” and “Dreams” and it will be a comment on the strange feelings that have arisen from being in isolation during the current pandemic. For the first time ever, this display will become a virtual exhibit and we will be taking advantage of the school’s production resources and using a 3D camera to film the display in 360 degrees. This will allow our users to explore the Curated Collection via our Virtual Library and reach an even wider audience, online,” says the JTL’s User Experience Librarian.

The library already ran an Instagram account, so the Acquisitions Librarian and User Experience Librarian worked to establish interactive ways of staying connected with users. To invite an online conversation between users and staff, a weekly quiz that ran across Instagram stories was launched. Also as part of this year's ALIA Library & Information Week, the team posted a daily Instagram story relating to this year's theme (Create), showcasing the work done by the library staff. As an example, day three addressed the idea of "Disruption", taking this word in the literal sense to shine a light on our recent renovations. Though it was a disruption to our regular operations, it was necessary to re-design the physical space into a more engaging and welcoming place for our users. "On the "Wildcard" day we got to show-off the things we create in the library. Naturally, we chose to highlight our engaging and interactive Curated Collection displays, including a Halloween witches-themed display, a display from 2019 celebrating the 50th anniversary of the moon landing and a display on the subject of Climate Change, which specifically highlighted our Indigenous resources," JTL's Acquisitions Librarian.

On user engagement with the Instagram account, the Acquisitions Librarian says, "To date, the engagement has been very good. We joined on January 30, 2020 and as of June 16, 2020 we have 308 followers. We have received positive feedback from AFTRS staff and students on our posts and stories. Initiatives we have promoted since COVID-19 like a regular online quiz, staff picks and an Indigenous Unit takeover have also achieved high levels of engagement, with at least a two thirds of our followers (200+ people) viewing the stories and many playing the quizzes. Even though the number of our followers is growing at a slightly slower rate than we would like, our follower base is highly interested in our content and engaged. As such, we feel positive in the quality of our social media output and will continue in our current direction to grow our follower base organically."

Two additional opportunities for connection were the virtual "staff picks", detailing staff member's favourite audio-visual material or books and where to find them online. Secondly, an online film festival. Originally planned as a 35mm film screening in the main AFTRS theatre, this event will now be adapted as an online experience and will involve a streaming feature and a live-stream presentation.

A further initiative for connection with staff and students was an updated internet page titled "Accessing the AFTRS Library FAQ", clearly outlining the new loans procedures, when and how users could locate resources and how to contact a librarian for any assistance.

6.3 The challenges of collection access and acquiring more eBooks

Having no access to the physical collection presented conflicts. With the school

term in session, suddenly losing access to physical learning materials, which make up a large portion of the JTL learning resources, lead to a significant increase in eBook demand. One survey respondent said that the technical process of requesting and purchasing eBooks was not difficult, however, the eBooks were often expensive, much more so than physical copies would be, which meant that budget became a concern. And of the 82 eBooks that the library purchased, 41 of them were already held as hard copies. The JTL provides lecturers with access to international productions on physical DVDs to be used in class, many of which are not available in Australia. Staff acknowledged that only having access to Australian streaming service providers, with restricted access to international productions, was a barrier.

The problem of not being able to purchase expensive eBooks was largely overcome by channeling the budgeted funds for physical items into the e-resources budget. To combat inaccessibility to hard copy material, the hard copy DVDs that were unavailable via streaming were format transferred by the library, under Section 200AB – Special Purpose Exception of the Copyright Act and uploaded to the Libraries streaming collection.

7. Facts and figures

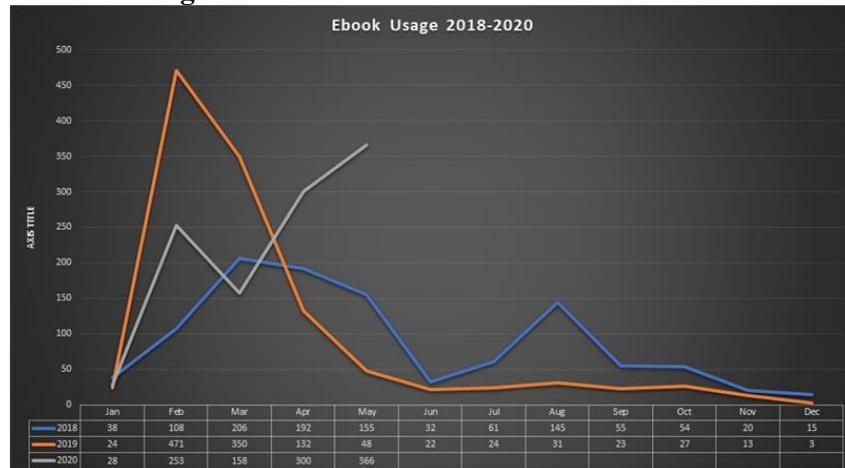


Figure 1 ProQuest LibCentral

Figure 1 shows eBook usage overall is higher at the start of the year due to staff preparation. However, during the April and May period for 2020 the eBook usage greatly increases again. Ebook purchases increased in 2020 by 50 percent.

The library experienced increased streaming usage numbers by approximately 35 percent.

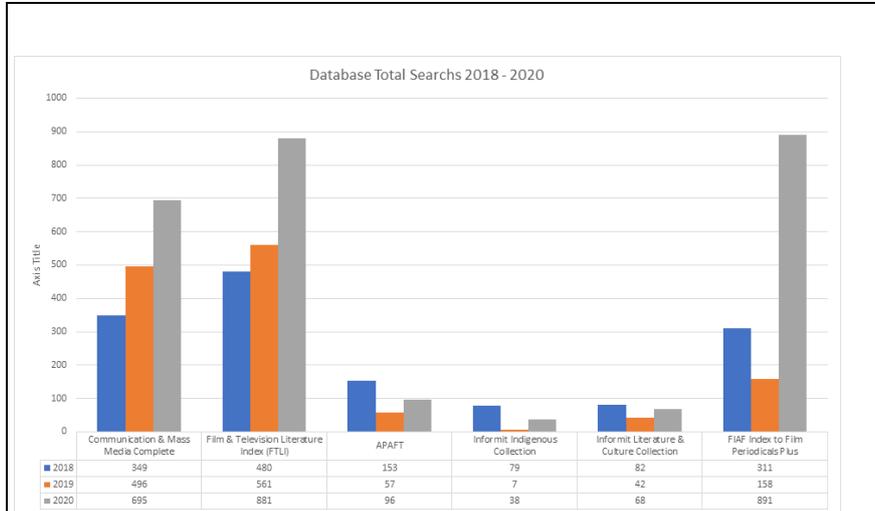


Figure 2 Ebsco Admin

Figure 2 shows there was a significantly noticeable rise in the amount of academic database searches that were performed compared to the past two years. This could be contributed to staff and students spending more time contemplating the resources they can access digitally, paired with the conscious focus of the librarians to encourage students to learn how to find information independently using the online resources.

In terms of the budget figures, while the JTL increased streaming resource acquisitions, the purchase amount did not reach the figure that would have been spent under general circumstances, therefore the library budget was at a surplus. To make the most of the allocated funds the Library Supervisor was tasked with deciding on where to redirect the funds. This is still being decided but will likely end up going into online journals, DVD, Blu-ray and script purchases, additional online audio-visual streaming services, along with stationary purchases, such as book cover materials and security cases.

8. What has been learned so far?

Up until recently, the JTL staff performed their duties on site. Survey results indicate that working from home has decreased staff stress levels while increasing staff output, with one respondent stating, “working from home has allowed for a quieter space then been in the building. It has allowed for more focus”,

and another commenting that their productivity had risen: “not having to spend the time travelling means I have more work time. Also found myself more productive in the comfort of my own home.”

It has become apparent that while the physical space is an integral part of the

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JTL and that the overall appeal, and possibly the service, would be diminished if it was wholly online, the staff can provide the same impeccable service and access to resources as was achieved through face-to-face interactions with users. One respondent says that they would never have thought JTL could “successfully move its most important library services online, but we have been able to do so.”

It is worth noting here the limitations of this initial survey. The survey was only open to the library staff and therefore to gain a broader, or fuller picture of the impact of the physical library closure and move toward an online environment it would be valuable to conduct a survey that included responses from the teaching staff and the students as well.

Being forced to shift to an online service has pushed the JTL to digital uptake services, therefore highlighting the advantages of such services. As noted by one respondent the library can now “provide a more holistic service by incorporating some of the initiatives that were developed during the Covid-19 pandemic.”

9. Looking to the future – what’s next?

Moving into the second half of 2020, if visitation remains restricted, it will be imperative that staff ensure the library is not a forgotten resource. Remaining a relevant organisation for school support will be an ongoing movement that will need to stay online, through our social media channels, email, digital events, and online workspaces.

Going forward, the JTL staff may need to evaluate the hardcopy collections, in terms of their value versus the physical space needed to house them and the risks taken to loan them out. Staff may need to consider new methods of distributing in-demand teaching material that cannot be accessed online post Covid-19. Such as the no-contact pickup and drop off procedure that is currently in place as restrictions ease slightly.

Library events are an important connection tool for the library. With event restrictions, together with a new sense of wariness of crowds, the numbers for near future events will likely be low. Library staff will need to devise ways to transfer library events to an online forum in a way that will allow for the levels of participation and engagement necessary to form a community bond.

Integrating pre- and post-COVID-19 procedures to make a more interconnected library service will be top of mind during the reopening of the physical library. Already library staff have begun to restructure the website to streamline the new virtual library into the existing website and update or delete obsolete pages.

While many staff and students were performing their own online research of the resources, it became apparent that the search capabilities could be improved for enhanced results. As ways to achieve this, integrating streaming services into

the catalogue search function and assimilating the research databases into the Trove catalogue are two methods being explored.

Finally, a large focus will need to be placed on staff and user well-being and how to re-enter the physical library safely will be paramount to the re-opening of the physical library.

10. Conclusions

During an anxious time, the JTL staff were forced to quickly shift library procedures and communication methods to fit an online paradigm. Not being able to access the library collection was a barrier that was mostly overcome by the further discovery of online material and streaming digital services. Maintaining a high level of support to users and ensuring engagement did not decrease dramatically was paramount and was ensured by swiftly utilising the digital communication tools already in place, while also seeking out new means of virtual connection and engagement. Now, as the JTL staff look to open the library doors and re-enter the physical workspace they do so with trepidation for what the return to the physical library holds in terms of health and safety and with the knowledge that the landscape of face-to-face connections might be changing forever. However, on top of this gentle caution is a sense of excitement as library staff navigate a space that breaks out of one physical place and allows for user connections across the country, and, as the virtual library showcases already, the globe.