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Australian public library staff living through a pandemic: personal experience of serving the community

Abstract

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic forced public library staff to rapidly rethink the services they offered as lockdown restrictions meant that libraries as social venues briefly came to an end. Online content was developed overnight to fill the void. This study examines the impact that the contactless operational model has had on library services across Australia, as seen through the eyes of eight public library staff. The qualitative study contributes in-depth data to scant literature about public libraries and the pandemic in an Australian context. The study highlights the value of libraries to the community. The need for in-person contact is discussed in terms of future service design in library and information practice.

Keywords: COVID-19, Australian public libraries, information practice, in-person service, qualitative research

Introduction

This study examines the experiences of the Australian public library workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic. The international crisis provided a unique opportunity to examine questions often raised about library work but never definitively answered. During lockdown, libraries delivered a contactless service occasioning a national experiment in how libraries operate without venues. The need for a library venue has been challenged by those looking to economise on space and face-to-face services (McKenzie, 2019, p. 374).

The scant literature on the topic of Australian public libraries and the pandemic has mostly concerned itself with business continuity and operational matters at the early stages of the pandemic (Fitzgerald, 2020; Smith, 2020). Much of it takes the form of surveys conducted

with library managers. With a few key exceptions (Smith, 2020), most contributions have come from academic libraries or from other countries, most frequently from the United States of America.

The focus of this study was on the personal experiences of Australian public library staff at all levels of library operations in order to gain a picture of issues that have been largely unexplored in the literature to date.

Reflection on pandemic events can help position libraries for the future because '*Through reflection [a practitioner] can ... make new sense of the situations of uncertainty or uniqueness*' (Schön, 1991, p. 61).

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative methodology and employs semi-structured interviews to gather data. It is hoped that this approach will help diversify research methodology in practitioner investigations, a trend that information and library science scholars believe will broaden the impact of information research (Julien et al., 2013, p. 258; Julien et al., 2011, pp. 19, 21).

This follows a broader trend outside the library science field, where there have been calls for research using '*a grounded, inductive approach that emphasises actors' first-order perceptions of what is "in" and "out" (or at the margins) of a certain domain ...*'

(Heracleous, 2004, p. 100). Other researchers make a case for the use of interpretive and social constructionist perspectives in organisation research (Nande, 2010, p. 36). With these calls for diversity in theoretical and methodological approaches, the present research project adopts a constructivist, qualitative methodology while employing some ethnographic elements (Bryman, 2016, p. 423; Olsson, 2016).

Theoretical framework

Social constructionist theory

Information research has begun to turn away from the idea of information as an object to be manipulated and has developed an interest in the social creation of knowledge (Buckland, 1991). This trend has been unfolding since the 1990's after philosophical shifts in social theory occurred in late twentieth century Europe driven by thinkers like Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu. Social theories about the creation of knowledge argue that '*people and groups create knowledge by negotiating the meanings of words, actions, situations and material artefacts*' (Gherardi, 2008, p. 517). It is characterised by the building of consensus around the primacy of some types of knowledge over other knowledge deemed to have less value. Therefore, '*People engaged in a working practice [for example, library workers] acknowledge a set of social positions which are interrelated, which make sense, and which are enacted*' (Gherardi, 2008, p. 520). This practice-based approach to information research has been pioneered by Australian researchers (Lloyd, 2007; Olsson, 2014).

An example of such positions in the public library sector could include the idea that libraries must provide access for everyone and that librarians should serve everybody equally (Gustafsson, 1999, as cited in Hedemark et al., 2005, pp. 3-4). These ever-evolving principles do not exist independently but instead have gained acceptance through a process of consensus among library staff and the communities they serve. The concepts are well established tenets within the Australian public library sector and are no longer contested or controversial. The knowledge that libraries are for everybody has been socially constructed to the point that it is seen by the profession as a fundamental principle of professional practice.

The social constructionist framework was considered appropriate for this study because it allows for participants' contradictory understandings to be expressed fully. After consensus is established, according to Savolainen (2007, p. 111), assumptions about accepted practice

are no longer subjected to scrutiny because these practices have become established.

However, contradictory constructions can continue to co-exist within a group. A decision was made to use the social constructionist framework because it accommodated all worldviews of our research participants and was considered to be the most appropriate theoretical scaffold when collecting data.

Some researchers have championed the idea that diverse contributions create the most adaptive responses (Snowden, 2002, p. 107). Other theorists, like Foucault, have drawn our attention to the productive consequences of diverse influences in social groups, irrespective of the authority role held by members.

Foucault urges us not to think of power only in terms of its “old” monarchical form, as something an individual possesses or wields over another or others. For him [Foucault] power works through culture and customs, institutions and individuals. Likewise, its effects are also multiple, not simply negative or positive, but, as he puts it, ‘productive’... (Feder, 2014, p. 56).

Participants have been recruited from all levels of the library workforce and exercise influence over their organisations to a greater or lesser extent. Broad participation in the study was considered important to capture all voices within the public library workforce. The research aims to uncover these nuanced experiences. Social constructionist theory facilitates the study’s methodology.

Interpretive theory

The research uses qualitative methodology and adopts interpretive theory when attempting to understand the subjective experiences of research participants. That is, the researcher attempts to interpret records of interview resulting from conversations with participants. Interpretive theory has gained acceptance among social researchers in recent years, and

stands in contrast to strictly quantitative methodology which holds that data should be objective, reliable and generalisable (Bryman, 2016, p. 401). The quantitative tradition arose from the study of the natural world where variables could be manipulated and ethical issues were less contentious than in the investigation of social phenomena. Social researchers, on the other hand, contend that qualitative research often yields a richer source of material and can be credibly analysed to reveal unique lines of inquiry (Bryman, 2016, pp. 27, 244). It is *‘the job of the social scientists to gain access to people’s “common-sense thinking” and hence to interpret their actions and their social world from their point of view’* (Bryman, 2016, p. 27). This study applies interpretive methodology to open-ended, semi-structured interviews to allow participants the freedom to contribute items for discussion on their own terms (Bryman, 2016, p. 244) so that the richness of their personal experiences can be investigated (Nande, 2010, p. 8) while optimising the chances of discovering new social phenomena.

The interpretive tradition acknowledges that the research content is an unavoidable co-production of the participant and the researcher (Heizmann, 2012, p. 10). That is to say, the researcher unwittingly brings some influence to bear on the interview material. This intrusion is managed by subjecting the research process to the scrutiny of both participants and wider audiences to allow research assumptions to be calibrated and to be developed further in future research.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were sought with public library staff across Australia during September and early October 2020. Eight interviews were conducted by telephone or by videoconference. A record of each interview was made either with handwritten notes or video recording. No face-to-face interviews took place. Participants were given the opportunity to correct the record to reduce the risk of misrepresentation in the research. The Australian Library and

Information Association (ALIA) *Member code of conduct statement* was observed in the design of the research and in communicating the findings (Australian Library and Information Association, 2020b). As a coursework Masters project, the study was reviewed by the subject coordinator, Dr Michael Olsson, to ensure ethical research practices were maintained using the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) human research ethics guidelines (University of Technology Sydney, 2021).

When devising sampling methods, consideration was given to three dimensions of the research. The study required the broadest representation of the following:

1. All levels of the library workforce, from operational personnel to library management. This was deemed necessary to fill gaps in the representation of operational staff in the existing literature.
2. A geographical spread of participants across Australia to sample different COVID-19 restrictions imposed by different state jurisdictions.
3. A mix of metropolitan, regional and remote library staff.

With these considerations in mind, convenience sampling was used to recruit research participants. The study then turned to a more purposive recruitment technique in an attempt to involve those who were under-represented.

To give some context to their experience of the pandemic, Table 1 frames participants' location in Australia and their position in the library workforce. Participants were equally divided between metropolitan and regional libraries. By coincidence, all metropolitan participants lived in the state of Victoria. The remaining four participants resided in other states and worked in regional libraries. Attempts to recruit library staff from remote libraries were unsuccessful.

POSITION HELD	Victoria	New South Wales	South Australia	Western Australia
Library manager				Tony
Librarian team leader	Alex		Carter	Jamie
Librarian	Chris, Morgan			
Library technician	Robin	Jesse		

Table 1: Participants' location in Australia and their position in the library workforce

At the time of writing the final report in mid-October 2020, there had been 904 deaths from SARS CoV-2 infections in Australia, with 816 of these occurring in Victoria, the worst affected state (O'Brien, 2020). Australian lockdown restrictions varied in severity and length depending on state and local government dictates (Stobart, 2020) with Victoria, again, the worst affected. All participants experienced library closures of varying duration depending on their location, with South Australian and Western Australian participants the least affected.

Records of interview form the unit of analysis. Each record was searched for categories of content that also appeared in other participants' records of interview. Records were read and reread in an iterative process to discern broad categories of content formed from clusters of related topics (Bryman, pp584-589). In this way, broad categories were identified as themes. Operational matters have been dealt with elsewhere in the literature and are not included in this analysis. Names have been changed to protect participants' identities. Informed consent was obtained from all participants using a standardised UTS consent form. Given the challenges of undertaking research during a pandemic, some participants indicated their consent via email or telephone confirmation rather than returning the form.

Findings

Ten themes emerged from the analysis. These are represented in Figure 1.

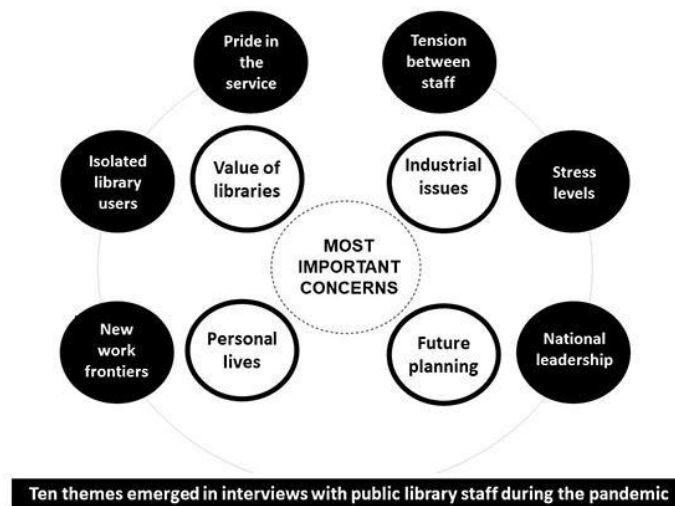


Figure 1: Ten themes emerged during interviews with participants

Excluding operational matters for reasons mentioned above, the issues below were raised more frequently and more emphatically by participants. The four main themes that emerged are represented near the inner ring of the diagram:

1. Value of libraries
2. Industrial issues
3. Future planning
4. Personal lives of staff

Five participants spoke unequivocally about how they became aware of the library's importance to the community. This theme will form the focus of discussion below. The discussion examines the value of libraries as revealed by the participants' experience of the pandemic. Time and space preclude reflection on all ten themes in the study.

Discussion

Many existential questions, such as the death of libraries, have come to the forefront during the COVID-19 pandemic and these have been canvassed by the study's participants during interviews. Chris comments,

You probably know from the time they introduced eBooks [everyone said] "Libraries are going to close down". It's not [going to happen]. Because 1: people are not going to buy a book! And 2: people don't like being on a screen all the time. They want the physical item. But [the pandemic] gave libraries the opportunity to see what other skills they could adapt to.

The surprise that the library service had value for the community corroborates other research conducted in Australia during the COVID-19 crisis (Australian Library and Information Association, 2020a; Fitzgerald, 2020). The data in the current research goes further in suggesting that it is the face-to-face contact with library staff in the venue that was most appreciated by library users and on full display when the libraries reopened. While staff were proud of how the operational model adapted to contactless delivery, the value of the open library venue was a revelation to participants who experienced concrete evidence that their work in the library venue mattered.

As libraries reopened, aspects of the service were re-evaluated. While there is pride and surprise in the effectiveness of operations that continued under pressure during the worst of the pandemic, the importance of face-to-face contact has been underscored by library shutdowns.

Tony, one of the participants, commented in a follow up email,

I think when things are taken away (such as on-premises library services) people miss them and realise how important they are (ie you don't know what you've got til it's gone).

Another participant, Alex, saw a queue of library users at the front door of the library as the second wave hit the state of Victoria.

The day we had to lockdown again, this is something I'll never forget is, we warned people, they knew we were going to close, there was a queue across the courtyard and outside the library and up the hill, for people lined up to take their turn to come in ... I would have loved to have taken a photo of it

The pandemic has created a two-pronged library experiment. Just as the emergency forced libraries to invent ways of delivering library content for distribution outside the library walls, the flipside has highlighted the problems raised by the absence of physical contact between library users and staff. This has occurred in spite of the best efforts of staff. The evidence suggests that the library offerings exceeded expectations, but that for the first time, the physical library was reassessed and found to be a critical part of the service. Jesse, another participant, observed,

I hope we don't go too far with everything digital ... because there is that digital divide.

Notwithstanding the immense pride and pleasure many of the participants expressed in the rapidly reconfigured online content, most participants expressed concern for library users who were no longer catered for: babies, the elderly, digitally disinclined, workers dependent on printing facilities and book groups in languages other than English, to name a few. An alternative view was expressed by one participant, Carter, who believed that staff tensions

were eased considerably by library closures before which time some staff were unable to live with fear of infection. *'Closing was a good thing. It reduced stress.'*

Alex, who held a middle-management role, came to realise while working from home that,

[We] used to curse it [students coming into the library] because they were so noisy and rowdy ... you almost miss that now because that is what we are here for It's not just about the books anymore. They [libraries] are ... social places

This underscores the social nature of the service and the staff that operate it. A regional library staff member, Jamie, felt strongly that *'we are **people people**'*, referring to the library team.

An abrupt convergence of traditional and digital activity took place with book pickup and delivery offered at the same time that library events and digital collections were developed online. During interviews, participants at all levels of the library workforce spoke fluently of the operational overhaul and how the library team endeavoured to meet the challenge. This raised some issues.

For some, there was a sudden awareness of the glaring gaps in the team skill set. Chris expressed frustration,

It is not going back to normal. We live in an evolving world People need to realise that it's not going to go back to normal, yes people will come back into the library but you need to embrace digital technology.

She went on to describe how a teaching role for library staff is fundamental to help confused technology users.

People, when they buy a smart phone, they get a plan with a company and they get a manual ... and if they're like me they look at the manual and they go uh They need

the hands-on touch. So I think if librarians could adapt to that and know what a smart phone does, for example, they could teach people in one-on-one sessions or group sessions. I did that as part of one of my jobs and I loved it! I may not be too au fait with the techy stuff but I know enough to help someone with it and ... people don't realise what libraries can do and we are still fighting that good fight where people think we are just full of books

This describes a valuable mediation role for library personnel. Chris illustrates the critical hands-on teaching potential of library staff. The participant believed that because of this, libraries will not die.

The pandemic gave libraries a window into a digital future and a chance to test the much-mooted vision of libraries without the associated real estate. Traditional and digital services converged overnight. The quick merger gave the opportunity to test the new arrangement nationwide. The evidence suggests that in spite of best efforts, gaps in service opened up. Participant Morgan, in a metropolitan library, observed,

Customers to be honest have had the biggest, probably the hardest, time because they haven't had access, I mean, we've been sending out books to people, but they haven't been able to browse. They haven't been able to take their kids to story time. There's that sense of community that's been lost.

Libraries as social hubs

Libraries have been affected by new thinking about the social creation of knowledge and services are being designed to satisfy the social nature of their users.

Our research goes further in suggesting that face-to-face contact is an important component of a library service. During the course of assisting people to use digital devices and resources, participants commented on the inconvenience of trying to achieve this while the

library was closed, or even when staff and library users were face-to-face at a COVID-safe distance. Jesse expressed anxiety about not doing her job well, even after the library reopened. Staff were instructed to keep a distance from library visitors while in the library. Many of the participant's clientele needed help to navigate online platforms.

I mentioned having to say no to people when they've wanted tech help or other things that would require close contact, but I don't think I mentioned how much guilt I've had and concern over not being very helpful... I think a lot of library workers would have some level of guilt over not being able to serve their communities in the way they usually would

This participant found that the transactional nature of the interaction at a physical distance from library users was inadequate to meet their needs because it erected an insurmountable barrier between user and staff member. It appears that face-to-face close contact is a necessary component of this service industry.

This brings into sharp focus the role played by face-to-face service and stoked a new appreciation for in-person contact. During the pandemic, like no other time in recent history, libraries have had the opportunity to realise their digital potential and seize the chance to increase the reach of their service. The paradox is that this has occurred at the same time that library staff are lamenting the loss of in-person contact with their users. Jamie made the point,

There were lots who missed us, babies and toddlers, missed the interaction, especially in a regional library, people who have just moved to town with a high number of elderly affected who are not digitally minded The health sector is getting all the praise for doing it right, but the library is helping get the mental side right: reading,

thoughts of losing jobs, keeping them occupied. ... They might have been in a mine for two weeks and need conversation with someone that they don't work with.

Role of emotion in library service

Many participants spoke in emotional terms of their experiences, particularly about their regret at not being able to meet community needs, or of the pride they felt in the quick pivot of the service. Analysis of emotion is a neglected area of practitioner research (Julien et al., 2011, p. 21; Krishna et al., 2021, p. 4; Olsson, 2010, p. 274) but is touched upon by some library science practitioners to promote the idea that libraries should accept their role as neutral third spaces by providing emotional support to library users (Wood, 2021, p. 154). Participants seemed, by and large, willing to accept this responsibility.

Social and digital focus of libraries

The fundamental understanding of the purpose of Australian public libraries has changed relatively little in the last hundred years, with the goals of good citizenship and life-long learning still strongly defined by the sector (Australian Library and Information Association, 2014, p. 2). However, the means of achieving these goals has shifted.

The library literature refers to the social and digital focus of libraries. This has been defined as a trend for cultural institutions to turn towards the social and digital creation of information (Audunson et al., 2019, Introduction section, para. 3). For the last twenty years, there has been an upsurge in social events taking place within public libraries. Libraries have also adopted, to a lesser extent, the use of social media and streaming content to communicate and share information (Audunson et al., 2019, Conclusion section, para. 5). The 2020 pandemic has placed a spotlight on the social and digital evolution of public libraries.

Social focus

According to participants in our research, library users were keen to return to the library upon reopening. Tony, a library manager in a regional library, was surprised by residents' response when the library reopened. *'They were so grateful!'*

While staff were proud of the quick pivot achieved by the library service, they were surprised at the appreciation shown by library users who wanted to return to the library space as much as they did to the on-site collections. This draws attention to the role of face-to-face conversation between staff and library users as well as the importance of library facilities. These were abruptly withdrawn from public use at the outset of the pandemic.

The social role of libraries has been crimped by the pandemic while at the same time the digital imperative accelerated overnight.

Digital focus

Participants of our study described the scramble to create digital content and make it available to residents once the library doors were closed. According to an overseas study conducted before the pandemic, digital content creation by libraires has not kept pace with forecasts, with library staff rating digital platforms as an area not central to the library service (Audunson et al., 2019, Conclusion section, para. 7). The 2020 pandemic reversed this phenomenon overnight. All participants reported immediate pressure to utilise digital platforms in order to provide content and communicate with library patrons while the library was closed. In addition to the book delivery and pick-up service that was devised in the aftermath of library closures, the greatest source of pride for participants was the achievement of a digital library service. This was not without its problems. Jesse, a new library staff recruit, saw the ironic circularity of offering assistance to library users unfamiliar with digital navigation by suggesting they go online to find instructions on how to use online services.

We had videos to promote using online resources but obviously you needed to be capable of going online to use Facebook to be able to access those videos.

Morgan, another participant, found the experience of being separated from colleagues and council managers while working from home to be an alienating process.

Lack of communication with managers, initially it was understandable, but seven months in, is still not fantastic. People are out of the loop. "Fill out this form" ... When you're in the branch [library], you can throw ideas around. But when you are working from home, you have to wait for people to call you back [expresses exasperation]. I got a lot of work done but I miss my colleagues, miss the social interaction.

Some observed a skills shortfall and lack of capacity to seamlessly deliver information online. Chris felt strongly that staff attitudes, rather than skill sets, were lacking.

People need to embrace change or get out.

In spite of these doubts, by most accounts, optimal digital output was achieved by libraries. However, with the exception of two participants, few made reference to the digital uptake by library users of electronic resources. Anecdotal evidence suggests that while digital sources have experienced an increase in uptake by library members, the longer-term use of online resources is not yet possible to predict. Jamie, working in a regional library, observed,

There was an increase in the use of downloadable books, but now that users have returned to the library, this usage is going down again.

In spite of prodigious online content production, doubts remain about its usefulness in the longer term.

Ideally, digital collections offer independence to library users who can use digital collections without resorting to mediation by library staff. One participant, a library manager, mentioned that online library content helped the library reach new audiences and intimated that this frictionless service would be provided into the future. At the same time, the participant lamented the loss to the community of in-person service. These observations were echoed by Jesse's comments that the strain of helping those who could not help themselves independently online was '*definitely the most frustrating thing [during the pandemic]*'.

Robin, a library staff member with a previous career in digital delivery, described the impossibility of giving assistance by phone when staff could not view the digital devices being used by library members at the other end of the phone.

It's tiring in a pandemic, with eResources, they [the library users] couldn't remember their password, using iPads for the first time and had to give them instructions and they couldn't explain the problem.

Participants frequently referred to the need for conversation and the benefits to everyone of coming together in a library venue. This is at odds with the vision of public libraries as technologically innovative and at the forefront of social change. The utility of the library venue for interpersonal communication and access to facilities is underscored by most participants' accounts. This presents a problem in two ways. In the medium term, a pandemic works against gatherings of people in close contact. In the long term, library real estate is expensive and needs to be justified in economic terms by an evidence base, a difficult task when the benefits of face-to-face contact are hard to control and measure (Bonner & Lloyd, 2011, p. 1219). Aside from these pragmatic realities, libraries now operate by offering a venue and personal support as much as a collection.

Contrary to the message of current library scholarship and trending ideas which direct librarians to focus on digital impact in communication and collections, on-site interfacing continues to be an important consideration for librarians. Instead of moving linearly toward social seclusion in tandem with the electronic communication, public libraries are circling back to their origin [as social venues] (Wood, 2021, p. 145).

Conclusion

The pandemic set the scene for a large-scale social experiment played out in Australian public libraries. Our research supports the argument that personal contact within the library venue is a necessary component of community engagement and must be part of a robust library service that caters to a broad spectrum of users.

Some library research has developed the idea of the library as a ‘*third place*’ where conversation is a key component of service delivery (Wood, 2021, p. 145). Wood’s research postulates that public libraries offer their users a community zone for relationship building and conversation. She describes libraries as neither home (first place) nor work (second place). Wood argues that because there is a retreat into private domains across the Western world, libraries must not only urgently accept their responsibility to provide space in the public sphere, but to also acknowledge the place of interpersonal communication (Wood, 2021, pp. 146-147). Our study appears to support this proposition.

Face-to-face interaction in library venues provides more than conversation. As other research makes clear, when individuals are in one another’s presence, they are able to share focus and to perceive that this is occurring in the other (Goffman, 1983, p. 3). It involves ‘*emotion, mood, cognition, bodily orientation and muscular effort*’ (Goffman, 1983, p. 3).

It is not only that our appearance and manner provide evidence of our statuses and relationships. It is also that the line of our visual regard, the intensity of our involvement, and the shape of our initial actions, allow others to glean our immediate intent and purpose, and all this whether or not we are engaged in talk with them at the time (Goffman, 1983, p. 3).

The current study highlights the instinctive nature of person-to-person contact in the exchange of information. Participants in the study provided evidence that while the new models were a source of pride, they did not meet all human service requirements, in spite of the best efforts of all. A standard suite of library services will continue to be developed at least into the medium term (Fitzgerald, 2020, p. 4) as pandemic conditions continue, but future planning will proceed in the knowledge that there are limits to a large-scale online rollout and book delivery. Library practice and service design will be shaped by the experiences and reflections of its workforce. These observations include the need for embodied contact with library users to ensure the best possible service in library and information practice.

About the author

Maree Wilson is a student of the Masters in Digital Information Management course at the University of Technology Sydney. This research was conducted as her capstone Masters project, supervised by Dr Michael Olsson. She has worked for over 25 years in various library sectors, most recently for TAFE NSW.

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