

## Postmodern Openings

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# Libraries Reaction of Romania to the Crisis Caused by COVID 19

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**Abstract:** Nowadays, given the global crisis generated by the new coronavirus COVID-19 that led to the installation of a global pandemic, the role of libraries, regardless of their type (public, academic, university, specialized etc.), is very important, given that they represent the main sources of trust in the distribution of verified information. The way they responded to the challenge was different from case to case. Public libraries were the first to realize that they need to find solutions to stay in touch with their users, using the new media technologies, bringing to them credible and up-to-date information on topics of interest to each citizen or for each institution. Knowing the aspects of information literacy (especially digital literacy) have proved indispensable to be able to relate in this virtual form. In this paper we want to do a research on the mechanisms identified by each type of library to come in real support of users, given that fake news has invaded social media and it has become increasingly difficult for ordinary people to assess the correctness and the veracity of the information. The analysis was performed on all 41 county libraries plus the Metropolitan Library of Bucharest, National Library of Romania, Library of the Romanian Academy, as well as on a number of university and specialized libraries, the aim being to observe their reaction capacity and adaptability in times of crisis.

**Keywords:** *libraries; crisis management; information literacy; social media; communication.*

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## 1. Introduction

The 21st century is under the influence of two world trends: the development of information and communication technologies and the transition to information society and the new learning methods. In this context, libraries are playing a crucial role in promoting ICT activities based on resources and services which can be easily distributed, updated and manipulated (Erich & Gorghiu, 2016, p. 225). It should be mentioned that the importance of the topic addressed in this paper for postmodern studies lies in the fact that libraries, as information and documentation structures, are the ones that had to adapt quickly to the new transformations generated by the information society. The situation generated by the current epidemiological context has led to a rethinking of library activities, regardless of their type.

This paper aims to highlight how these cultural institutions have adapted to the new context, addressing innovative methods and techniques characteristic of the information society, in order not to lose touch with their users and to support the community with verified and useful information. It has been shown that all these aspects are closely related to a good command of information literacy techniques that are very important for library users because they demonstrate the importance of information, traditional or online, and how to use it in a scientific context (Malizia et al., 2012).

The topic is also among postmodern studies because the role of the librarian in the pandemic situation is to promote and disseminate public health information by popularizing prevention measures, but also by supporting researchers with materials and information on the latest discoveries in the field (Featherstone et al., 2012).

Libraries must play an indispensable role in times of crisis, such as the one we just went through, being a kind of information center for members of the community served (Featherstone et al., 2008). An important role during this period is the selection and evaluation of information disseminated in the public space by professionals within these institutions who have the ability to provide that sense of security and normalcy in crisis situations, precisely by basing their informational argumentation on a selection and a very strict evaluation (Zach, 2011, p. 405).

An important role in this paradigm is played by the adaptability of library staff, an adaptability that has been tested over time by the fact that

this profession has undergone perhaps the most drastic changes, passing in a fairly short time from the traditional way of working to the one imposed by the new information and communication technologies. In times of crisis, the librarian's ability to select, acquire, evaluate and disseminate relevant information is demonstrated. Even if the physical space is closed to the public, staff must continue to provide remote information (Tîrziman, 2020, p.1). How this happened in the period we have just experienced, we will try to find out through this analysis.

## **2. Information / communication methods approached by various types of libraries during the analyzed period**

During the analyzed period (March 16-April 13, 2020), the sites of the various types of libraries were analyzed in order to review the methods chosen by them in order to maintain the connection with the public related to the communities they serve (Yap, 2020).

Libraries of various types were selected precisely to observe how they responded to their primary mission: informing the public. Thus, we turned our attention to libraries that, in accordance with the Library Law, have the status of national libraries (National Library of Romania; Library of the Romanian Academy); to the county public ones (all the 41 county libraries plus the Metropolitan Library of Bucharest); central university libraries (Bucharest, Cluj, Iasi, Timisoara); state or private universities libraries (Craiova, Târgoviste, Pitesti, Brasov, Bucharest Polytechnic, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Constanta, Sibiu, *Spiru Haret*, *Titu Maiorescu*, Romanian-American University, *Dimitrie Cantemir* Christian University); specialized, in this case the medical ones (*Carol Davila* Bucharest, *Grigore T. Popa* Iasi, *Victor Babes* Timisoara, *Iuliu Hatieganu* Cluj Napoca, *George Emil Palade* Târgu Mures).

The first observation was that most libraries stopped working with the public, a commendable fact given the pandemic context related to the spread of the virus (ALA, 2020). This decision was not taken simultaneously and uniformly by all libraries, which is normal if we take into account that the supervisory authorities that coordinate them are different (county councils for county libraries, local councils for municipal libraries, Ministry of Education for central university libraries, universities for university libraries, educational institutions for related libraries etc.). Subsequently, each institution addressed some issues strictly related to the crisis situation, but also those related to maintaining a link with its own users (Muhammad et al., 2020).

Among the aspects strictly related to the crisis situation we mention:

- posting an announcement, assumed/not assumed by the management of the respective library, by which the users are informed that the activities with the public are suspended during the pandemic period;
- providing information on COVID-19 coronavirus (Ashrafi-Rizi & Kazempour, 2020);
- providing information on combating its spread (posting articles, studies etc. from the publications owned by each library);
- access to information resources, from official sources, related to the crisis situation.

Among the aspects related to maintaining the connection with the users we mention:

- providing access to the library's digital resources;
- the possibility to scan a limited number of pages / request that can be sent via email;
- informing that the deadline for the return of publications is automatically extended for the entire period declared urgent and
- that no penalties are charged;
- organizing online activities (children's stories via YouTube or Social Media).

After analyzing the following were found:

Presence of announcements / press releases regarding the suspension of activities with the public during the period declared pandemic:

- National Libraries: The National Library of Romania posted 3 announcements on different dates (the first dated March 10, 2020, the last April 8, 2020, this being assumed by the management); The Library of the Romanian Academy posted a single announcement referring to decision no. 6/6.03.2020 of the Technical-Scientific Support Group on the management of highly contagious diseases in Romania (Vabret et al., 2020).
- County public libraries: Metropolitan Library of Bucharest posted an announcement dated 30.03.2020; among the counties libraries all had such announcements except those from Călărași and Mehedinți; the first announcement was made on 11.03.2020 by three libraries: Dâmbovița County Library, Piatra Neamț County Library and Vrancea County Library, followed on 12.03.20 of the Harghita

County Library and the Hunedoara County Library. The *Teleki-Bolyai* Library of Târgu Mures displays a simple announcement specifying that all visits are stopped

- Central university libraries: all 4 libraries had announcements starting with 12.03.2020
- University libraries: of those analyzed, only the libraries of the universities of Craiova, Brasov, Bucharest Polytechnic, Bucharest University of Economic Studies and Sibiu had advertisements posted. Of the private ones, *Spiru Haret* has an ad posted on the university's website, not on the library's one
- Specialized (medical) libraries: only *George Emil Palade* University of Târgu Mures has an announcement regarding the special program from this period, dated 10.03.2020. The libraries of the *Grigore T. Popa* of Iasi and Cluj Napoca medical universities have information only on the websites of the respective universities.

Specific information on COVID 19 and hygiene measures to be observed (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020):

- The county libraries from Bacău, Baia Mare, Botosani, Dâmbovita, Gorj, Ialomita, Vaslui, Vrancea are the ones that during this period offered on their websites such information
- University libraries: only the University Library of Sibiu had posted such kind of information

Access to official information provided by state institutions:

- The county libraries of Constanta, Dâmbovita, Iasi are the ones that have realized the importance of disseminating official information related to the pandemic

Posts on the library's website of announcements of local authorities regarding the state of crisis:

- The county libraries of Alba Iulia, Cluj and Iasi posted the announcements of the local authorities

Announcements on the extension and non-penalization of delays regarding the return of publications:

- Metropolitan Library of Bucharest: announcement dated 30.03.2020
- County libraries: most, except for those from Călărași and Mehedinți who did not provide any information during this period

- Central university libraries: all 4 libraries
- University libraries: Craiova, Brasov, Bucharest Polytechnic, Bucharest, University of Economic Studies and Sibiu

Information on access to the library's digital resources:

- National Libraries: The National Library of Romania has no announcement in this regard, but the site offers opportunities through the *National Digital Library*; The Library of the Romanian Academy has no announcement in this regard, but the site offers opportunities through *Medievalia*
- The Metropolitan Library of Bucharest has an inaccessible digital library, the explanation being related to the lack of funds allocated for maintenance
- County libraries: the county libraries from Arad, Brăila and Covasna took over digital resources from the National Library website; most offer access in digital format to their own publications: Cluj (*Lectura* magazine), Constanta (digitized resources from own documentary funds), Craiova (digitized resources from own documentary funds), Dâmbovita (*Curier* magazine; digitized resources from own documentary funds), Gorj (Cultural Memory), Harghita (Memory of the Szekler Land), Brăila (Romanian Literature), Hunedoara (Hunedoara Writers); Sibiu (digitized resources from own documentary funds)
- Central university libraries have usually allowed access to subscribed scientific databases. In addition, the Central University Library Bucharest allowed access to the online editions of *Bursa*, *Ziarul Financiar & Business magazin*, *Forbes Romania*, *Forbes Life*, *Forbes Kids*, *Curierul National* and *România Liberă*. The Central University Library Timisoara offered a list of electronic resources with free access and provided full text articles on the subscribed electronic resources platforms (CEEOL and JSTOR). The Central University Library Cluj also offered access to digital libraries: *Transilvanica*, *Scoala Ardeleană*, *1918 Transilvania 100+*. Central University Library Iasi also facilitated free access to e-books from the *De Gruyter* and *CABI* collections
- University libraries: The Library of the University of Sibiu allowed access to remote scientific databases until June 2020, a program run under the motto # *from home*, as well as online access to

periodical subscribers; The Bucharest Polytechnic Library allowed access to the subscribed scientific databases.

- Specialized (medical) libraries: The library of *George Emil Palade* University of Târgu Mures facilitated access to the digitized collection of documents in the Museum Hall of the History of Medicine and Pharmacy

Ability to scan a limited number of pages / requests that can be sent via email:

- National Libraries: The National Library of Romania allows this service based on a specific Regulation; The Library of the Romanian Academy offers this service for a fee
- The Metropolitan Library of Bucharest offered this service within a limit of 30 pages
- County libraries: at the time of the analysis three libraries offered this service, those of Constanta, Dâmbovita and Sibiu
- Central University Libraries: The Central University Library Bucharest allowed this service on request, by filling in an online form; The Central University Library Cluj offered this service for a fee, based on a request; The Central University Library Timisoara accepts a maximum of 3 requests / day of 30 pages each for those who did not have a library card, but had an institutional e-mail address; The Central University Library Iasi offers this service for a fee
- University libraries: some of them have this service for a fee
- Specialized (medical) libraries: *George Emil Palade* University of Târgu Mures offers this service for a fee

Organizing online activities:

- National libraries: during the analyzed period neither of the two libraries (National Library of Romania and Romanian Academy Library) organized such events
- The Metropolitan Library of Bucharest presented a *Calendar of online activities* through which it offered users alternative means of spending free time, on several social platforms
- County Libraries: Botosani County Library launched the *#bibliotecaecutine* program which materialized in a permanent, unique dialogue, through online networks, being a campaign to challenge

reading, but also to get acquainted with the treasures of the library; The Oradea and Brasov county libraries offered activities in the virtual environment focused on online fairy tales, psychological counseling or *Wednesday's Story*; Brăila County Library initiated the *Inform from Home* program; Călărași County Library organized a virtual workshop and Craiova County Library, exhibitions, courses, anniversaries online. Dâmbovită County Library has created Facebook pages for all sections and branches where books and documents from the library's collections were presented. Ialomița County Library focused on online reading, the one in Mehedinti on virtual exhibitions and Piatra Neamț on the *Evening Story*

- Central University Libraries: The Bucharest Central University Library offered a virtual tour and the one in Cluj through the *#stamacasasi* program, various specific online activities
- University and specialized (medical) libraries did not offer such services during this period

### 3. Findings on how libraries react to the crisis situation

Analyzing the websites and Facebook pages of various libraries, we found that most were concerned with notifying their users about the cessation of activities with the public, in accordance with the recommendations on the state of emergency declared at national level. The largest share was held by the county libraries (less than two having no such announcement on the websites of the institutions: Călărași and Mehedinti). Călărași County Library has only an announcement of this kind on its Facebook page, dated March 31, 2020).

Some of the libraries, especially the county ones and the university ones, have demonstrated during this period that their primary role is to disseminate verified information about the pandemic to the community served. Thus, it turned out that the information needs of the public in specific situations are also specific (Erich & Gorghiu, 2015, p. 540). For example, the information requirements of healthcare professionals, and not only, have been increasing and librarians have had a major responsibility to meet these requirements in the most professional way.

Surprisingly, the first libraries which understand this were the county libraries, which, through websites and Facebook pages, transmitted such information taken from reliable sources. Also, the county libraries were the ones that popularized the official information coming from the local authorities (Hilburn, 2020). The only university- level library that provided

scientific information on COVID 19 was that of the University of Sibiu (latest scientific resources on Coronavirus, with remote access under the motto # *from home*). From our point of view, the *Carol Davila* Library could have established itself during this period as an opinion leader in terms of providing specialized information related to COVID 19 or other medical issues, having professional authority over the information distributed based on reliable and relevant sources (until April 22, 2020, it had not posted any such information on its website.) No other libraries belonging to universities with a medical profile provided such information during this period (Falt & Pratin, 2020).

In times of crisis, the credibility of the source is the key to effective communication (Public libraries launch, 2020). Thus, the official institutions (Romanian Government, Ministry of Public Health, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Smurd, Local Health Directorates etc.) were the ones that won the trust of the people. Libraries should not be missing from these credible sources either. Unfortunately, in this regard, the Romanian libraries did not react very well. Only three county libraries (Constanta, Dâmbovita, Iasi) offering access to information from these official sources.

Regarding the way of adapting the transmission of information to the public and maintaining contact with it during this restrictive period, we found that most libraries analyzed have identified solutions to keep them in the attention of users (Covid-19 and Global Library Field, 2020). Thus, the National Library of Romania offered access to the digital library (documentary funds, old foreign book and bibliophile, virtual exhibitions, incunabula, old Romanian periodicals, manuscripts etc.). But, access to the subscribed databases was allowed only from the institution's headquarters. The Library of the Romanian Academy allowed access to the *Medievalia* project, which contains fundamental texts of medieval Romanian culture. The Metropolitan Library of Bucharest, even if it stated on the site that it offers access to the Digital Library, it was inaccessible. County libraries have made available to the public, in digital format, documents related to local history (books, manuscripts, views, ex libris, own publications etc.). The central university libraries and some of the university ones offered free access to the scientific databases to which they subscribed, as well as to some periodical publications. A pleasant surprise was offered by the Library of *George Emil Palade* University of Târgu Mures, which allowed access to the digitized collection of documents in the Museum of the History of Medicine and Pharmacy.

A very important aspect was that the activities moved to the online space. Many county libraries have found innovative solutions to keep in

touch with readers. Thus, they organized online readings, offered psychological counselling, initiated virtual exhibitions, online courses, virtual tours etc. Also, the Facebook pages of the libraries were much better perceived during this period by the public, most of the activities taking place practically there. Current information related to hygiene practices, ideas on physical exercises that can be performed at home, tips to combat depression etc. were posted.

#### **4. Conclusions**

From our research we deduced that most libraries had a prompt reaction to the crisis situation. Many of them made timely public announcements related to the suspension of the activity with the public. One part provided information about or related to the crisis situation, and another part limited itself to providing information strictly related to the activity of the library itself (Ting & Brady, 2020).

Once again, it has been proven that libraries play an important role in providing verified information about crisis situations to their users, especially in the context in which fake news has become very widespread and, unfortunately, has just as much impact on among those who do not have the ability to discern between false and real information. In these times of crisis, the role of the librarian is fundamental, as he is the specialist who has the ability to evaluate the source of information so that when he disseminated information, there is certainty of its veracity.

Another aspect worth considering by the authorities would be for libraries to be included in emergency management commands as this can help solve problems related to the communication of much-needed information in times of crisis. For example, the Dâmbovită County Library was included, by decision of the tutelary authority, in the composition of a working group for the elaboration of a continuity plan of the activities at the level of the county institutions.

It should be noted that the provision of links to verified resources on the crisis situation itself was not a priority for libraries, with the exception of some of the county libraries.

Libraries need to use their position as the primary source of reliable information, providing quick and easy access to those looking for information on what to do in an emergency. Further research is needed on how libraries can best collaborate with other organizations to respond to the information needs of the public in times of crisis and to become active

participants in emergency community planning and response activities (A European Library Agenda For The Post-Covid 19 Age, 2020).

This period was referred to as the "Great Break", but librarians were the first to react by finding modern methods and techniques to keep in touch with their users, being aware that society will never be the way it was before the crisis (Feldman, 2020).

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