

Research Report: Are Archivists Essential Workers? Documenting the Effects of COVID-19 on Funded Archival Institutions

ANASTASIA S. WEIGLE, Ph.D.,

University of Maine, Augusta

VANESSA REYES, Ph.D.,

University of South Florida

Abstract: Investigations on the impact of COVID-19 on libraries in the United States have spotlighted library workers' resilience, determination, and innovation during unprecedented circumstances. The pilot study aims to explore what archivists did during the COVID-19 shutdowns in 2020 to better understand the value of access to collections during times of crisis. Our study will also challenge traditional concepts in archive management, placing access on equal footing with the protection of provenance and original order and bringing light to collections as essential to our communities.

Introduction

During the Covid-19 lockdowns in 2020, library workers became known as second responders, revealing their resiliency, determination, and new practices that ensured their users had access to resources at the library. The American Library Association (ALA) 2020 survey looked closer at our libraries' vitality to our nation, people, and community. However, Lyrasis, a non-profit organization serving and supporting libraries, archives, and museums (LAMs), conducted a survey designed to capture data about archival collection practices during the early days of COVID-19. The Lyrasis survey did not address the essentialness of archives in areas such as user services and collection access. The only way to tell the stories of America's archives is through communicating with the Archivists. This pilot study explored what archivists have done during COVID-19 lockdowns to understand better how archives were essential to communities during this time of crisis.

Problem Statement

The most notable data gathered in the Lyrasis survey were those archives that were fully closed for months without environmental monitoring by staff, thus compromising the collections. A shutdown of archives without environmental control is disconcerting as it goes against the essentialness of archives and their workers, who collect, preserve, and make available historical documents of enduring value. To understand the resiliency and essentialness of archivists, we need to know how challenges during lockdowns mobilized archivists to find solutions to ensure continued services.

Methodology

The following is our rationale for the pilot study research design and method, including the recruitment process. They are as follows:

1. We conducted a literature review on the impact of Covid-19 lockdowns in the archives and its impact on users.
2. A purposive, nonrandom sampling was used, allowing the researchers to seek participants within a group based on similar or specific characteristics. For this pilot study, that would be Archivists who work for a funded archive/repository that serves a community (academic and public) who work in an archive/repository during and after Covid–19 lockdowns in 2020. We have invited five archivists from the state of Maine and five from the state of Florida to participate in our pilot study.
3. We used a survey instrument to post open-ended questions to produce long-form written/typed answers. The questions aim to reveal opinions, experiences, narratives, and accounts.
4. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic coding using the Society of American Archivists' five core values:
 - Acquire
 - Identify and preserve
 - Access and use (digital & physical)
 - Service to community (DEI)
 - Advocacy

Status of Results

We had anticipated completing the study in November/December of 2022. However, due to the Institutional Review Board's delay in approval due to backlog and limited staff, our pilot study had a late start. Thus far, the data collected and analyzed addressed our research questions with feedback about the state of archival collections in a post-pandemic world. The sentiment expressed from the majority of the participants was that those were overwhelmed, due to an increase in the demand of scanned materials, virtual access, thus causing work fatigue. As the 2020 restrictions were changing, the Pandemic left an effect on archival institutions, from compulsory masking to mandatory vaccinations. Depending on size, and type of repository, we noted how much this impacted the wider challenges associated with access, and archival instruction, prioritizing workloads to meet demand requests.

Conclusion

Data gathered on the state of archival collections in the year 2020, post-pandemic world, provided first-hand accounts from archivists who experienced the challenges and revealed their resiliency and essentialness during a crisis. A nationwide study is in order and should include a broader spectrum of archivists and their repositories to better inform information professionals that archivists are essential

workers. During these times best practices were developed as a result of the difficulties that were faced to promote access and use of collections which is at the core of our values as archivists.

Resources

American Library Association. "State of America's Libraries Special Report: COVID-19." (2021).
<https://alair.ala.org/bitstream/handle/11213/16664/State-of-Americas-Libraries-Report-2021-4-21.pdf?sequence=1>

Johnson, R. B., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2004). Mixed methods research: A research paradigm whose time has come. *Educational Researcher*, 33(7), 14-26.

Klettlinger, Katy LW, and Leigh A. Grinstead. "Collecting archival materials during the COVID-19 pandemic." (2020).
<https://www.lyrasis.org/programs/Documents/Pandemic-Survey-Report-2020.pdf>