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Not Virtual Enough: A Virtual Library's Challenges During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Pas assez virtuelle : les défis d'une bibliothèque virtuelle pendant la pandémie de la COVID-19

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Article abstract

As part of the University of Manitoba Libraries Outreach Services, the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority (WRHA) Virtual Library provides library services to hospitals, health centres, community health agencies, and personal care homes throughout the city of Winnipeg, Manitoba. All services of the WRHA Virtual Library, including the collection, are entirely virtual, though staff are physically located in the University's health library. In March 2020, shortly after the World Health Organization declared the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, libraries around the world started closing their doors and staff were required to work from home. The virtual infrastructure of our services and collections required no changes in how our patrons accessed the Virtual Library and a smooth transition was expected, but the sudden shift to working from home revealed gaps. This article discusses the unique experience of the WRHA Virtual Library transitioning to a completely virtual environment, the previous reliance on the University's physical infrastructure, and the inequities identified between librarians and library technicians.

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Not Virtual Enough: A Virtual Library's Challenges During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Pas assez virtuelle: Les défis d'une bibliothèque virtuelle pendant la pandémie de la COVID-19

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Abstract / Résumé

As part of the University of Manitoba Libraries Outreach Services, the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority (WRHA) Virtual Library provides library services to hospitals, health centres, community health agencies, and personal care homes throughout the city of Winnipeg, Manitoba. All services of the WRHA Virtual Library, including the collection, are entirely virtual, though staff are physically located in the university's

health library. In March 2020, shortly after the World Health Organization declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, libraries around the world started closing their doors and staff were required to work from home. The virtual infrastructure of our services and collections required no changes in how our patrons accessed the Virtual Library and a smooth transition was expected, but the sudden shift to working from home revealed gaps. This article discusses the unique experience of the WRHA Virtual Library transitioning to a completely virtual environment, the previous reliance on the university's physical infrastructure, and the inequities identified between librarians and library technicians.

Faisant partie des services d'extension des bibliothèques de l'Université du Manitoba, la bibliothèque virtuelle de l'Office régional de la santé de Winnipeg (ORSW) fournit des services de bibliothèques aux hôpitaux, aux centres de la santé, aux agences de santé communautaire et aux foyers de soins personnels à travers la ville de Winnipeg, Manitoba. Tous les services de la bibliothèque virtuelle de l'ORSW, y compris la collection, sont entièrement en ligne, quoique le personnel est situé physiquement à la bibliothèque de santé de l'Université. En mars 2020, peu après la déclaration de l'Organisation mondiale de la santé de la pandémie de la nouvelle maladie à coronavirus (COVID-19), les bibliothèques du monde entier ont fermées leurs portes et leur personnel a été obligé de travailler de la maison. L'infrastructure virtuelle de nos services et collections a nécessité aucun changement quant à la façon dont nos usagers accèdent à la bibliothèque virtuelle et nous nous attendions à une transition harmonieuse, mais le changement soudain au télétravail a révélé des lacunes. Cet article présente l'expérience unique de la transition de la bibliothèque virtuelle de l'ORSW à un environnement complètement en ligne, de sa dépendance antérieure à l'infrastructure physique de l'Université et des inégalités identifiées entre bibliothécaires et bibliotechniciens.

Keywords / Mots-clés

pandemic, COVID-19, virtual libraries

pandémie, COVID-19, bibliothèques virtuelles

Introduction

The Winnipeg Regional Health Authority (WRHA) Virtual Library is part of the University of Manitoba Libraries Outreach Services unit. The WRHA Virtual Library provides library services to health professionals at six hospitals, five health centres, and numerous community health agencies and personal care homes throughout the city of Winnipeg, Manitoba. These services are entirely virtual and include:

- Access to an extensive collection of electronic health resources, including databases, ejournals, and ebooks
- Literature searches conducted by health librarians

- Webinars, videos, and education sessions to demonstrate how to find and assess health information
- Current awareness services to help patrons keep abreast in their practice areas
- Document delivery, to provide access to resources not included in the WRHA Virtual Library's collection

The WRHA Virtual Library employs three librarians and three library technicians and is part of a larger unit with two additional librarians and one technician. All staff work out of the university's Neil John Maclean Health Sciences Library and are employees of the University of Manitoba.

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada in March 2020, staff of the WRHA Virtual Library transitioned to working from home, as libraries around the world were doing. Without the need to manage physical spaces or collections, we anticipated the transition would be seamless. We were wrong. While the virtual infrastructure we had in place required no changes in how our patrons accessed the WRHA Virtual Library, our staff were reliant on the physical infrastructure on campus to conduct their work. We also quickly realized the inequity that existed between our staff; librarians were equipped to transition to working from home relatively easily, while library technicians were not. Despite being able to transition our entire team to working from home faster than other campus libraries that had physical spaces and collections, the impact of the shift was significant, even for a library that is entirely virtual.

Reliance on Physical Infrastructure

Though the WRHA Virtual Library's services and collections are virtual, its staff work together in-person. When staff were required to work from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we quickly realized the reliance we had on the physical infrastructure of our workplace. Some of this was common to most workplaces, such as access to ergonomically designed workspaces and the ability to discuss issues in person without having to schedule meetings or utilize virtual messaging systems. Others were more unique and therefore unexpected and surprising.

- **Telephones:** WRHA Virtual Library patrons regularly call staff about their library accounts, passwords that need to be reset, and other common issues. Staff each have a phone line in addition to the central phone number. When staff transitioned to working from home, a plan had to be created to receive phone calls. Some phone lines were forwarded to cell or home phone numbers, which blurred boundaries between home and work resources and hours. The shared central line had to be set to let calls go to voicemail, which staff checked regularly but which does not support the highest level of customer service. Some staff had newer office phone models that immediately sent recorded voicemails to email, which was not a feature that all staff had access to, and still resulted in a delayed response.

- **Desktop computers:** All library technicians and most librarians use desktop computers as their primary workstations. Staff were permitted to take home their desktop computers, but they required a wired internet connection, which most staff did not have in their homes. Laptops were therefore made available for some staff to take home, while other staff utilized personal home computers. These solutions required a VPN setup with potential security concerns (Breeding, 2020) and installation of work software on home machines. Further, consistent with the experiences of Mehta and Wang (2020), campus information technology services were overwhelmed by the sudden surge in demand and delays were therefore experienced in requests for support.
- **Processing document delivery requests and inaccessible print collections:** Though the WRHA Virtual Library has an extensive electronic collection, patrons request many journal articles and book chapters through interlibrary loan. During pre-pandemic workflow, staff would receive print copies of loan requests that facilitated tracking of requests and payments. When staff transitioned to working from home, the entire process needed to be digitized. Staff needed to create a new workflow to ensure that requests were not missed or misfiled. The digital-only process is more time- and labour-intensive than the physical process, due to added complexity.

With physical libraries closed, staff were not able to fill many document delivery requests. Though most material is available electronically, often electronic versions cannot be loaned due to copyright and licensing concerns (Pokorná et al., 2020), whereas print versions can be. Staff then had to determine if an ebook could be purchased, or find electronic tables of contents and process requests for select chapters. Ebooks were also purchased to address demand resulting from document delivery limitations (Hunt, 2020).

- **Payroll authorizations and invoice payments:** Most elements of processing invoices and payroll had previously moved to online formats, though the university still required approvals and authorizations to be done on paper. It took nearly two months for e-signatures to be accepted, for staff to have the software to sign documents with e-signatures, and to create workflows to process these electronic documents. Adjustments were also needed for payments and communications previously done through fax, which staff did not have access to when working from home. Some institutions required payments to be done through fax, and numerous clients submitted their patron registrations and literature search requests by fax. In time, invoices could be paid electronically or over the phone, and patrons adjusted their methods of communication to phone or email.

Inequity Between Librarians and Technicians

Staff of the WRHA Virtual Library did not equally share the issues identified in the working-from-home transition: Library technicians, not librarians, shouldered the brunt of the complications. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, librarians in the unit already

possessed the ability and the infrastructure to work from home and did so periodically. In contrast, it was nearly two weeks before technicians were fully set up to work from home. This inequity was partially the result of the differences in duties between groups, with technicians responsible for tasks that utilize physical infrastructure that cannot be taken home, such as fax machines. Technicians occasionally had to physically visit the workspace when electronic options were unavailable, taking on risks associated with potential COVID-19 exposure. In comparison, librarian work relies on databases and online tools that can be easily accessed from home with an adequate internet connection. Additionally, technicians were used to working in a shared, open office space where physical procedures and documentation rather than digital processes were used. Librarians, on the other hand, worked in individual offices, and did not engage in the same level of daily collaboration regarding their duties as the technicians did; the shared physical infrastructure that the technicians relied on for their work largely did not exist for the librarians.

Some inequities can also be attributed to differences in financial supports between librarians and technicians. Librarians are given professional development funds that could be used to purchase technology and resources for work-from-home purposes, such as laptops. Technicians do not have access to such funds and relied on their desktop computers; this echoes the concerns regarding technology provision and equity noted by Craft (2020). Technicians must go through complicated and time-consuming procedures to request technology and resources, or they must pay out of pocket for these items. Additionally, some librarians have work-issued cell phones, allowing them to keep their work and personal phones separate, rather than requiring use of their personal phones to field work calls. Given that technicians field most of the calls to the WRHA Virtual Library, this is a particularly stark point of inequity.

Conclusion

Consistent with findings from other libraries and library organizations, there was a strongly felt need to continue provision of library services through the pandemic (Kosciejew, 2020), including additional support specific to COVID-19, particularly as the WRHA Virtual Library is a health library. (Mi et al., 2020; Yu & Mani, 2020). In addition to the unique challenges summarized above, our staff also experienced the universal difficulties and disruption in the transition to working from home, including ergonomic issues with temporary workspaces, isolation from coworkers, interruptions from children and pets, concerns around work-life balance, and the overriding stress of the pandemic. Staff used to working on double monitors struggled to manage using only laptops (Suraweera et al., 2020). Furthermore, after the Virtual Library team had established themselves in their home environments, the rest of the university system 'caught up'—requiring that staff learn a new technology platform (Microsoft Teams) to communicate with those outside our immediate team.

Despite these wide-ranging issues, staff are now for the most part settled into working from home. The university provided the opportunity to take home furniture and equipment in order to improve home office setups. New workflows have been developed to address disruptions to in-person processes. Regular virtual meetings are

held to support social interaction and communication of day-to-day concerns (Rysavy & Michalak, 2020). Additionally, staff occasionally go on-site to access the fax machine and process returns. As seen at other institutions, there has been a significant increase in virtual reference services (Walsh & Rana, 2020; Diaz, 2020), alleviating some of the demand for phone reference.

The transition to an entirely virtual workplace was surprisingly challenging considering that the Virtual Library had no physical collections or public spaces. However, the move to working from home during the pandemic highlighted areas where even a virtual library remains reliant on physical workspaces, including infrastructure, technology inequities between staff, and lending of interlibrary loan materials. These issues have required considerable adaptations to processes and ways of working. Nevertheless, the resilience of our staff has been outstanding, and provision of library services has been largely unhampered due to the dedication, flexibility, and collaboration of the Virtual Library staff.

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