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Introduction

Libraries are important public spaces through which the social life of the city can be read, like ‘diagnostic windows in society’ (Mehta, 2010: 16) or ‘a barometer of place’ (Robinson, 2014: 13), which can tell bigger stories about the state of cities and nations. This chapter investigates the transformation of public libraries in the United Kingdom (UK) and the Netherlands (NL) during the COVID-19 crisis. In both countries, public libraries were already in some state of crisis when the pandemic hit. Financial pressures, decreasing membership, and digitalization required libraries to reinvent themselves. In the Netherlands, libraries increasingly serve as spaces of encounter facilitating social networks and care (van Melik, 2020). However, being temporarily closed and reopened under strict regulations causes a major setback in the library’s functioning as a ‘social infrastructure’ (Klinenberg, 2018). In the UK, the devastating public impact of COVID-19 takes place on top of an already-existing state of emergency: that of
a national public infrastructure crippled by ten years of austerity and hollowing out of library services (Corble, 2019).

This chapter starts with an overview of the national pictures of British and Dutch public libraries before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, after which we discuss two important changes in: 1) the library’s functioning and 2) the nature of librarianship. It is based on interviews with seven anonymized staff members (three in NL, four in UK) and UK public library worker and campaigner Alan Wylie, who sits on the national ‘Cultural Renewal Taskforce’ for steering library services through the COVID-19 crisis. These interviews took place within the framework of our volunteering-as-research practices that already started in the years prior to the pandemic, respectively in a single library in a suburban context of Utrecht (NL) and a library service including multiple sites in a London borough (UK). Through this data we address the question of what the public library is for, when services are stripped back to the bare functional minimum of information provision, and their vital social spaces and infrastructures are suspended as the impact of both neoliberalism and the pandemic takes its toll on public life.

Crisis-upon-crisis

It is well-evidenced that libraries are essential lifelines for low-income, isolated, or marginalized people (Jaeger et al, 2014), and during a global pandemic such lifelines are more critical than ever. Public libraries facilitate digital access and support for citizens to access essential online welfare services and are often the only source of both face-to-face and online connection for a significant portion of the population, as well as providing the core offer of supporting literacy and cultural development. However, as with many (public) institutions, public libraries are heavily impacted by the COVID-19 crisis, though the hardest hit might be yet to come as most subsidies for 2020 were already granted before the pandemic started.
Dutch libraries rely for a large part (82 percent in 2018) on (mostly municipal) subsidies, amounting to 407 million in 2018. As government budgets are expected to be strained in response to the COVID-19 crisis, the library's income is likely to reduce significantly in the future. However, it is important to note that this sense of decline already pre-existed COVID-19. Between 2014 and 2018, there has been a decrease in subsidies (-5 percent), the number of library locations (-27 percent) and adult membership (-12 percent) in the Netherlands.

In the UK public libraries are also reliant on public subsidy, and central government puts legal obligations on local governments to provide ‘a comprehensive and efficient library services to all persons desiring to make use thereof’ (Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964). The last decade of austerity has thrown the UK public library network into crisis, as successive rounds of funding cuts have hollowed out services. Despite widespread local and national campaigns to save libraries from cuts and closures, since 2009–10 local authority spending on neighborhood services was reduced by 28 percent, with public libraries taking the biggest financial hit with a cut of 41 percent, and these cuts have been larger in more deprived areas of the UK. In the same period, 17 percent of libraries have closed and the number of professional employees in UK public libraries fell by 38 percent, while the number of (largely untrained) volunteers delivering library services rose by 187 percent.

This crisis situation is also felt in our two investigated cases. Our Dutch case is the only library left in town; two other locations were closed due to budget cuts. It is staffed by two part-time librarians assisted by a pool of 15 volunteers. When faced with further cuts, the library’s director responded to the alderman: ‘Why don’t you close this library too and free me from the responsibility to run it with too limited means? We already work on a “minimum scenario”, further budget cuts are impossible.’ Fortunately, the municipal subsidy was not strained since. However, future prospects look bleak, as
the municipality announced that COVID-19 forces them to make cutbacks, and the library was already framed as ‘extra’ the town could do without.

Our UK case is a public library service in an inner borough of London with significant socio-economic deprivation and a young and ethnically diverse population. The service has been profoundly affected by a decade of austerity: in 2010 it had one central library and 12 branch libraries – today it has only three professionally staffed ‘hub’ libraries, one largely self-service council-run library, and nine community-managed branch libraries which receive no statutory funding and are staffed by volunteers, but remain stocked by council-owned circulating book stock through a networked community liaison model.

Therefore, there already was a ‘hollowing out’ and ‘deprioritization’ of library spaces and services (Robertson and McMenemy, 2020) in both countries prior to the pandemic. As one UK library manager argues, ‘We fight every day to keep the service alive. It feels like a war zone. Library leaders have battle scars on their backs.’ At the same time, adult illiteracy is alarmingly high; 18 percent in the Netherlands and 16 percent in the UK. We can thus speak of a crisis-upon-crisis situation, which perpetuates social injustice for the most vulnerable of library users and workers, whose lives and livelihoods depend on social investment in libraries as spaces of care. Despite this injustice, there is a policy narrative in the UK that posits COVID-19 as an ‘opportunity’ for libraries to play an essential part in local recovery and continue to reinvent themselves as hubs for partnership and collaboration using neoliberal business models and voluntary labor.

**Changing function of the library**

It is increasingly acknowledged that public libraries are more than ‘Habermasian’ information infrastructures facilitating literacy, but also vital social infrastructures (Klinenberg, 2018). According to the Dutch library law of 2015, providing
knowledge and information is only one of the five functions libraries should fulfill, alongside, for example, organizing encounter and debate. UK legislation is less explicit on the socio-cultural functions of public libraries, however, the national charity that supports strategic library service development defines the four ‘Universal Library Offers’ as 1) reading, 2) digital and information, 3) culture and creativity, and 4) health and well-being.\textsuperscript{12}

In 2017–18, the majority of people using UK public library services were Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic and unemployed, and 34 percent of users were adults with long-term illness or disability.\textsuperscript{13} UK libraries are also a key service that can bridge the nation’s significant digital divide, since 10 percent of the adult population have either never or rarely used the internet and 16 percent are unable to use the internet without assistance and rely on public library services to gain online access and support.\textsuperscript{14} As sites of such vital social and digital inclusion, it is perhaps not surprising that libraries were one of the last public infrastructures to close their doors in the UK’s response to COVID-19, much to the concern of many vulnerable library workers.\textsuperscript{15}

At the first height of the pandemic, library buildings in both countries were fully closed for at least two months, during which a plethora of online activities emerged such as virtual reading group and storytime sessions, increasing online collection access, and a range of outreach activities for vulnerable citizens.\textsuperscript{16} During the lockdown, digital membership of UK libraries grew by 600 percent and e-book lending statistics quadrupled.\textsuperscript{17} Not all UK public library staff were able to focus on such digital services during lockdown, however, since many were redeployed into local authority COVID-19 response teams, delivering services such as crisis helplines, social care outreach, and in some cases even working in cemeteries to help manage the mounting death toll (Interview Alan, 2020). Once some of the lockdown measures were eased, many UK and Dutch libraries offered a ‘click-and-collect’ option,
which allowed patrons to order their books online that could be collected at the library’s doorstep. Facilitating public access to physical lending collections during a pandemic turned out to be a laborious and time-consuming process, with books requiring a three-day quarantine period according to WHO COVID-19 guidelines.

At the time of writing (October 2020), all Dutch libraries have reopened, but with limited social activities. In the UK, only some libraries are gradually opening restricted services and facilities, but with stringent limits on numbers and timeslots and no social interaction between patrons. Some libraries are calling this a ‘grab-and-go’ service, adopting the vocabulary of fast-food outlets. For Linda, a Dutch librarian, the library is back to being a ‘book-borrowing-factory’, a point echoed by her London counterpart John, who likened his newly reconfigured job to working in a warehouse. The prospect of such a functional and transactional approach to library services prompted London librarian Alan to reflect:

‘It’s going to be very strange. For years we’ve been fed the narrative that libraries are about much more than books – they’re about interaction and community and outreach – but now it’s a case of no lingering, no browsing – just come in for your books or your information and then – bang – you’re out the door.’

Changing nature of librarianship

Prior to COVID-19, librarian roles were increasingly being reframed – from ‘information experts to community advocates, teachers, and as match-makers for people to meet one another and new ideas’ (Barniskis, 2016: 114). Anne, working in our Dutch case, is currently taking a ‘Community Librarian’ course to equip her for these new duties, such as organizing lunch meetings for elderly or engaging with studying or gaming youth. As such, Anne’s job has become more relational,
requiring emotional labor, or in her own words: “simply being a human, and caring like a mother”.

We should be careful not to romanticize this development, as this changing nature of librarianship is indicative of broader changes in today’s neoliberal society, in which responsibilities for and expressions of care are shifting. As Aptekar (2019: 1205) acknowledges, ‘while themselves under assault, libraries often compensate for the decline of other social services’. Yet, community librarian courses do not equal a degree in social work. That said, staff in our investigated libraries have been strongly devoted to transforming the library into a social infrastructure. Yet the fruits of their labor were lost overnight as libraries had to close their doors due to COVID-19.

One of our London cases, a well-used, volunteer-run library providing for the educational and welfare needs of local residents who suffer considerable socio-economic deprivation, had to close its doors two weeks before the official lockdown began and remains closed. It has no feasible plan for how to safely reopen, without any access to protective equipment, security staff, or safeguarding for its largely elderly volunteer workforce. Meanwhile, the few professionally staffed libraries that remain in this London borough saw their workforce redeployed to new council divisions set up to manage the COVID-19 crisis, and many librarians exchanged running reading groups for answering emergency helpline calls and sometimes even working on death registrations in the borough. Library staff were also asked to fill the social care gaps in the community by going to citizens’ homes and helping them with their personal care needs. Library Assistant Tony reflected on the anxiety he experienced during this period: “I was scared when I read that email … We didn’t feel we had the right skill sets for that kind of work and we didn’t feel like we would be safe.” These concerns were well-founded, given that several staff members had already been infected with the virus while the library was still open prior to lockdown. To avoid being exposed to further risk and stretching their vocation beyond
the limits of public librarianship, these workers focused on developing a program of online literacy and storytelling videos.

After being allowed to reopen, the professional duties of library workers changed again. Instead of acting as social infrastructures, staff were now occupied by enacting very strict protocols, such as organizing the three-day book quarantine and sterilizing shopping baskets. In mid-June, after the initial happiness of being allowed to reopen had faded away, Linda complained that she “might as well work in Albert Heijn [a Dutch supermarket]”, as she would be cleaning baskets there also. She immediately added that disinfecting the library is an important task she gladly performs, but that everything that gave her job challenge and content is now gone – with little prospects that organizing social activities is allowed anytime soon. Consequently, it is very likely that some of the organized activities, like the lunch meetings for lonely elderly, will be difficult to rebuild after social restrictions are eased. Norcup (2017) shows the difficulties of maintaining such architectures of sociability in the long run under ‘normal’ circumstances, let alone in times of a pandemic.

**Conclusion: Loss-upon-loss**

COVID–19 has worsened an already precarious situation for public libraries, adding loss–upon-loss for the vital roles they fulfill as a social contract. As Robinson and Sheldon (2019) argue, bearing witness to such loss is important for our understanding of the everyday ways in which libraries matter. The current crisis could be the final nail in the coffin of some public libraries. Indeed our UK case fears for its future to operate at all, since it has lost the small income it had from renting out the space to community groups and selling second-hand books, and the expensive utility bills are mounting up without means to pay.

Daunting though this situation certainly is, it also shows us we desperately need robust public institutions, and not only
in the domain of public health. If anything, our findings show that libraries have not become obsolete, even if their physical functioning is limited to click-and-collect. Though librarians’ tasks have changed from organizing lunch meetings and helping with homework to sterilizing baskets, offering online assistance, and sometimes even being re-deployed to other council work, spaces and relations of care still exist in and through the library and its staff.

Yet, the dominant narrative, at least in the UK, of seeing the COVID–19 crisis as an ‘opportunity’ for libraries to show their value as essential lifelines is problematic. As Alan puts it:

‘It’s as if the last ten years of austerity hasn’t happened. All this rhetoric of COVID[-19] being an opportunity for libraries to reinvent themselves – I get the feeling that it’s just another round of moving libraries towards a neoliberal hub model … there’s no “new normal” as they say – the only thing that’s “normal” is gearing up for the next round of cuts.’

When asked where the hope lies for the future, Alan replied that what keeps him going is continuing to provide for the library community and fight for the rights of his fellow library workers. The other library staff we spoke to confirmed a sense of how struggling through the working conditions of the pandemic together created a renewed sense of what a public library is for: a space of care, no matter how fragile, hidden or restricted the infrastructures may now be.

Notes

1  www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-suffolk-53312324
2  In 2018, 10 percent of the UK’s adult population were internet non-users, which raises grave concerns for these citizens’ access to public health information and welfare services without access to public libraries (Watts, 2020).
3  www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2020/02/11/bijlage-2-kwink-eindrapport-evaluatie-wsob
References


