

Staying Healthy and Connected: Small and Rural Public Libraries' Facebook Use during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

This paper documents and compares how small and rural public libraries in four U.S. states (MI, NC, OK, VT) utilized the social media platform Facebook to disseminate information and to stay connected with their communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus here is on health and wellness, as this study is part of a larger IMLS-funded research project on health and wellness programming in small and rural libraries. By examining three months in 2020 (March, July, December), trends emerge, including: The normality of the first half of March shifted to closures and cancellations in the second half; different strategies deployed during the summer; and a certain level of adaptation to the new normal in December. By highlighting how small and rural libraries stay afloat and stay connected with their communities, this paper highlights the continuing need to attend to the unique needs of small and rural librarianship in LIS curricula.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

public libraries; social media; community engagement; research methods.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

small and rural public libraries; health and wellness; COVID-19; disaster response.

INTRODUCTION

The Library of Congress closed to the public on March 12, 2020. During the following week, public libraries throughout rural America also closed to the public. Due to the lack of a coordinated response from the federal government, rural libraries and library systems were often left with the responsibility of deciding, within their local contexts, how to respond to the pandemic.

As researchers, we too were challenged on how to respond. Our IMLS-sponsored grant team was collecting data about how small and rural public libraries were providing health programming and promoting wellness within their communities. Libraries in this study were in North Carolina, Vermont, Michigan, and Oklahoma. When the public libraries closed, we started documenting the libraries' utilization of social media, and in particular, Facebook.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The LIS profession has already prolifically produced scholarship concerning library responses to COVID-19, even though it has been less than one year since everything about our professional and personal lives changed, seemingly overnight. In countries as diverse as Pakistan, Ireland, and Croatia, libraries of all sizes have been in the fray since approximately mid-March 2020, when shutdowns began occurring on a global scale (Ali & Gatil, 2020; Carberry et al., 2020; Holcer, 2020). April 1, 2020 saw a total of 35 states in the U.S. issue directives or mandates either requiring or encouraging residents to remain at home as much as possible and when in public, take various precautions to help stop the spread of COVID-19 (Freudenberger, 2020). Librarians quickly made decisions about how to move services online; how to continue to offer programs; and how to stay connected with their communities (Alajmi & Algudawal, 2020; Ali & Gatil, 2020; Carberry, 2020; Holzer, 2020). As the pandemic progressed and worsened throughout 2020, librarians became innovative with both programs and services, instituting curbside pick-ups of all sorts of materials; and holding storytimes, concerts, and book clubs via Zoom or YouTube (Goddard, 2020).

How did small and rural libraries in the U.S. respond to the pandemic? Small libraries (serving fewer than 25,000) comprise approximately 76.3% of public libraries in the United States, and about 46% of all public libraries serve rural populations (IMLS, 2021). As well, 30% of public libraries' service areas consist of fewer than 2,500 individuals and employ 1-2 staff (ALA, 2017). Although the world was unprepared for COVID-19, rural libraries often stepped up to the challenge (Chase, 2021). According to Chase (2021), "[s]mall and rural libraries were the first to offer services during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, and, in many cases, continue to outpace their large, urban counterparts in providing access to their communities" (p. 237). The anecdotal evidence Chase (2021) presents suggests that small and rural librarians may have led the way in our national library response to the COVID-19 pandemic. What lessons can we learn from looking closely at how small and rural libraries responded?

METHODOLOGY

Community Health and Wellness: Small and Rural Library Practices, Perspectives, and Programs is a project funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) that began in August 2019 as a four-state effort to understand how small and rural public libraries address health and wellness through public programs (IMLS, 2019). Prior to interviewing librarians and other stakeholders, the research team documented how the 16 participating libraries supported health and wellness by scraping information on relevant programming from their websites and social media. The data was organized using Zotero and tagged using a shared set of terms. Examples of health and wellness data collected include library programming, community partners, health and wellness challenges in each community.

When COVID-19 arrived, both the libraries and the researchers shifted gears. Close attention to library utilization of social media revealed that for many small and rural librarians, Facebook was emerging as a primary platform for both staying connected to constituents and disseminating information. To understand how small and rural librarians used Facebook to share health and wellness related information and programming during the pandemic, posts related to this topic were closely analyzed using grounded theory techniques (Charmaz, 2006) from three months (March, July, December 2020).

FINDINGS

In total, 441 posts related to health and wellness information and services were collected from the set of 16 libraries for the three months studied. This section details what was found in each state, before comparing and discussing the implications of these findings.

Oklahoma.

The governor of Oklahoma instituted a “safer at home” policy closing some businesses, and municipalities made further decisions about closings or mask mandates. Libraries worked within their municipalities on their pandemic responses. The four libraries in the study are branches in two rural library systems and both systems closed on March 16.

Both systems responded to the pandemic by making numerous health-related posts in March (22 for one system, 14 for the other), this dropped by July (9 and 2), and again by December (2 and zero). Many early posts specifically addressed COVID-19 such as handwashing for kids, information about masks, and informative flyers about the virus.

The systems used their Facebook accounts differently. One posted mostly original content including videos created with a health literacy grant from the state library’s IMLS LSTA grant. They covered exercise, healthy recipes, home spa techniques, and gardening topics. The other system predominantly shared links from sources such as local and national news, state/national government agencies (health departments, CDC, Census Bureau, IRS), and other libraries. They included links to COVID-19-related economic stress such as unemployment

insurance and claims, food assistance, eviction moratoriums, and rental assistance; and shared locations where people could get health services such as COVID testing and flu shots.

Michigan.

On March 11, 2020, the governor declared a state of emergency. Five days later all Michigan libraries were directed to close by the first in a series of executive orders in response to the emerging pandemic. Each of the four libraries used Facebook to keep its community informed about library services and hours. All transitioned in mid-March to provide new types of service in response to the directives from the governor. One library was quick to offer programming both offsite/outdoors and online. All four libraries shared COVID-19-related information and resources.

In July, the library that had offered programming in March increased the frequency and type of programs – virtual live programs, outdoor on-your-own-time programs, and virtual asynchronous programs. The other three libraries showed some increase in virtual programming but nothing approaching the number of programs offered by the fourth site. All four libraries offered regular updates on services as well as COVID-19 information updates.

Facebook activity by the four libraries in December was uneven. One library – the one that hit the ground running in March – continued to increase its programming while the other three focused on sharing information about resources available through the library.

North Carolina.

In North Carolina, the governor issued a statewide stay at home order on March 27, 2020. All participating libraries had closed by March 18. One library moved quickly to generate original content, posting the day after its closure an engaging illustration on how to utilize new curbside services. A different library started the practice, continued throughout the year, of focusing its posts on content created by others, including timely information on places to go to get free food and free workout videos created by the local YMCA.

The four libraries took different courses during summer. One library shared extensive information on new outdoor services, including WiFi picnic tables and grab-and-go health programming activities. Another library focused content around virtual programming, including co-sponsored cooking classes with the cooperative extension.

December posts evince both continuity and adaptation. The library that offered virtual cooking programs in the summer continued them. The library that promoted outdoor opportunities during the summer continued these, including the announcement of a new little food pantry outside the library. A third library increased its original content, including posts on a StoryWalk and online yoga classes.

Vermont.

On March 13, 2020, the governor declared a state of emergency. All participating libraries started implementing curbside services. One library immediately developed an

emergency COVID-19 resource program to match community needs with services (e.g., food, shelter, etc.). On March 26, the governor ordered all non-essential businesses and services to shut down. The libraries all closed and stopped curbside; the remainder of the month they posted information about COVID-19.

In July, all libraries cautioned people to wear masks, stay six feet apart, and use hand sanitizers. One library posted that it would open again at 25% capacity. Another reopened curbside and posted information on local food distribution efforts. All libraries continued posting COVID-19 information, from both state and federal sources. One smaller library offered a full slate of outdoor programming including yoga, gardening, and a StoryWalk.

December included announcements about free food and holiday meal kits offered by local restaurants in towns served by three of the libraries. One library linked to a virtual local solstice event for the homeless. One library announced that the town's ambulance service was offering COVID-19 testing. Another encouraged patrons to pick up free snowshoes and poles.

DISCUSSION

What messages about health and wellness did these small and rural libraries communicate to their communities during the COVID-19 pandemic? The messages vary from community to community, but include:

- Providing enriching virtual programming for people as one way to provide library services under the stay-at-home orders
- Sharing online programming created by others and produced in-house by the library workers
- Making library resources like wi-fi accessible via hotspot lending and extending the reach of the signal to library parking lots and other outdoor areas
- Sharing timely information related to COVID-19 and to local efforts to ensure community members have access to the resources they needed to stay healthy and well during the pandemic, including food and outdoor recreation
- Sharing information on library efforts to engage patrons safely outside
- Sharing information related to library closures, services, and re-opening plans

The strategies these libraries developed emerged out of their creativity and ingenuity and a keen awareness of the challenges facing the people in their communities. In the context of weak national messaging on how best to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, local institutions like libraries had to figure out how to respond on their own.

In many states, small and rural librarians also turned to state library agencies for information and support. In our interviews with librarians we are exploring how guidance from the state may have informed library responses. We are also seeking to understand what other sources of information proved valuable to librarians as they developed policies and practices, and

services and programs during the pandemic. In interviews, we intend to better understand how utilization of Facebook overlapped with other means of disseminating health and wellness information and learning opportunities during the pandemic to the community members with limited or no Internet access.

Implications for education.

The findings of this exploration of small and rural librarians' utilization of the social media platform Facebook to promote health and wellness during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed several important implications for LIS education. These include ensuring students leave equipped to:

- Share relevant information in their communities, particularly in the context of a disaster, including knowing about efforts to distribute resources, such as food, to those in need.
- Start, maintain, and leverage community partnerships, including during disasters. These partnerships enabled small and rural librarians to continue collaborating with local instructors, farmers markets, extension educators, and more to offer everything from classes on how to Blanch and Preserve Vegetables to Yoga.
- Be aware of and connected to health information providers and policy makers in their state and region, including both local health districts and state Offices of Rural Health, as well as food pantries and extension educators.
- Initiate and contribute to policy discussions around information policy and broadband inequities. More than “filling in the gaps,” small and rural librarians could share their stories to advocate for library funding as well as policies that more generally lead to healthier, better informed, and more connected small and rural communities.
- Develop a community appropriate communication and outreach plan.
 - Whether outside or online, small and rural librarians turned to spaces outside of their building to keep communities engaged during the pandemic. Policies that draw on the lessons learned during COVID-19 could help librarians do this work more effectively in the future.
 - The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated how essential digital technology is, despite broadband inequities, to small and rural librarian community engagement. Digital communications strategies for small and rural librarians need to be part of our curriculum
 - The COVID-19 pandemic also illustrated the versatility and importance of outdoor space, which was used for everything from WiFi Picnic Tables to curbside pickup to socially distanced in-person programming. Small and rural libraries frequently have very small indoor spaces. Being able to frame outdoor spaces as programming spaces for small and rural librarians should be better incorporated into our teaching.

Finally, reflecting the fact that many small and rural librarians do not have MLIS degrees, and many will never secure MLIS degrees, there is a strong need for continuing education, led by LIS faculty, which could be offered in conjunction with state library conferences. More

generally, LIS faculty and students need to meet small and rural librarians where they are, as we learn with them and from them. Together we can forge a sustainable health and wellness infrastructure for our communities.

CONCLUSIONS

Small and rural libraries are not always seen as core components of community health ecosystems. During a worldwide pandemic, the small and rural librarians who are participating in this study exercised ingenuity as they used the social media platform Facebook to stay connected to their communities, keep residents informed, and to continue to serve the health and wellness needs of their patrons. The strategies employed were as diverse as the libraries themselves and included everything from creating new outdoor infrastructures to launching virtual cooking classes to sharing timely local, state, and national information. We encourage more scholars to closely attend to small and rural librarianship, and to weave the lessons learned from this inquiry into their teaching, mentorship, and scholarship.

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