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Library strategic planning after COVID-19

Don't fight the last war

The big guns thumped out their deadly cargo all through the night. The artillery barrage was so relentless that the German offensive, such as it was, halted almost before it even began. All the planning, all the labor, and all the money spent allowed the French troops to remain nestled in the safety of their giant concrete fortresses, which were dug deeply into the security of the earth itself. The Maginot Line was a success. The long and bloody Great War would not be repeated.

Of course the above paragraph is counterfactual. The German blitzkrieg simply went north around the Maginot Line and tore into France after a quick defeat of the Low countries. The Maginot Line is considered one of the great failures of strategic thinking in military history. The French war planners did not account for the changes in the world during the interwar period. They fell victim to the old adage, "generals always fight the last war." They based their planning on what had happened, instead of thinking about what might happen in the next war.

As of this writing, most of us in the United States are not in our libraries. We are under stay-at-home orders, due to the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19. We have had to rush to come up with creative solutions to make sure that we still served our users as best we could, regardless of these terrible circumstances. We have made a quick transition, in many cases, to online-only library services, and we've done a good job. There is much to be proud of in how we as librarians, individually and collectively, handled (and are handling) this crisis. But one day this crisis will be over.

When the current crisis is behind us, the landscape will be changed. The obvious change will be budget cuts, some of which will no doubt be devastating. But our collections and services will still be needed. All of our libraries will need to revise our plans for the future and consider what new plans we will need to implement.

Collections will be an area of great change and great concern. As libraries have kept pace with technology, we have been able to move to the electronic-only environment pretty quickly, especially with the mighty efforts of our colleagues in acquisitions, reserves, technical services, collection maintenance, and so many other departments. On social media, on blogs, and in many other places, these efforts have been rightly lauded. But in many of these stories, there is a secondary theme of how this shows proof-of-concept for an all, or mostly electronic collection, for libraries. No doubt it will be prudent to move more funding to electronic resources because we don't know if this coronavirus pandemic was a 100-year-

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event or if it is something that will stay with us in repeated surges.

A key point here, and a key point in all planning, is that we don't know. We have to make estimations based on the best information we have and alter our plans as new information arises. I don't know that any of us or our libraries were prepared for a pandemic of this scale. However, that doesn't mean that this type of scenario was not thought about by others outside of the library world. In the most recent Worldwide Threat Assessment delivered by the Director of National Intelligence to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, a flu-like pandemic is mentioned as a substantial threat to the United States.[1] In terms of planning for the future of library collections, one would do well to consider the rest of this report. In fact, the first type of threat mentioned is cyberattacks. There are mentions of state actors being able to disrupt critical infrastructure in the United States for days to weeks. The report specifically mentions gas lines, but it is very easy to imagine these being attacks on the power grid or our cyber-infrastructure. How will our users access their research materials when the lights are out for a few weeks? It seems farfetched, but it seemed unthinkable a few months ago that most of the nation would be in self-isolation for public health reasons. Given that, we need

to remember that print resources remain a valuable part of our arsenal, and we need to make certain that it remains a healthy part of our collections not just for crises, but for daily use. Print resources circulated before the crisis, and there isn't any evidence yet to think that activity will change. Library planners need to remember that while change is coming, the change may not be what we expect.

When the post-COVID-19 era arrives, I urge library leaders to adopt flexible, forward-looking strategic and tactical plans for providing resources and services to our users. Above I use collections as an example, but this applies to every facet of library operations. What worked at the height of the COVID-19 crisis will likely not be the best solution for normal times or for future crises. Learn the library lessons from this pandemic, but don't let them lead you. Don't let COVID-19 make you build a Maginot Line for your library. Don't fight the last war.

Note

1. Daniel R. Coats, "Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community," Statement for the Record to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, January 29, 2020, accessed May 5, 2020, https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/2019-ATA-SFR---SSCI.pdf. ✏

2. UCLA Library WI+RE. "About WI+RE." Page, WI+RE - Quick and practical research and writing tutorials, collaboratively designed by students at UCLA, 2020, https://uclalibrary.github.io/research-tips/about/.

3. Dani Brecher Cook and Doug Worsham, "Let's Build Something (The Toolkit)," April 2018, https://ucla.app.box.com/v/build-something-toolkit.

4. Doug Worsham, Nadia Brooks, Michael Lima-Sabatini, Kate Pham, Natalie Selzer, Kian Ravaei, Hannah Sutherland, Zoe Borovsky, Scott Martin, and Sylvia Page, "Remote Access—Get Config-

ured with VPN or Proxy on Mac, Windows, and Chromebook Computers," tutorial, UCLA WI+RE, May 2020, https://uclalibrary.github.io/research-tips/get-configured/.

5. Doug Worsham, Chris Lopez, Sylvia Page, Matthew Johnson, Kian Ravaei, Katherine Ramirez, and Michael Lima-Sabatini, "Your Remote EBook Roadmap," tutorial, WI+RE—Quick and practical research and writing tutorials, collaboratively designed by students at UCLA, May 13, 2020, https://uclalibrary.github.io/research-tips/ebook-access/. ✏