

EDITORIAL

“New” Agenda for the “New” Normal

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On March 7, 2020, less than two months after the first reported coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) case in the Philippines, the Department of Health (DOH) confirmed two cases of local virus transmission in the country (DOH, 2020). This was a critical turning point for the Philippines in which the national government declared an emergency health situation, implemented nationwide quarantine measures and restrictions, as well as long periods of lockdown. The number of cases in the country and in many parts of the world had steadily increased in the following days and months. Most hospitals reached their full capacity, schools were closed, travel bans were imposed, various industries were compelled to adapt by adjusting their business models, and work-from-home arrangements became the regular means to continue the workflow of organizations and businesses. This global pandemic caused major disturbances to people’s daily lives, and sunk the world into crisis.

In the midst of uncertainty and looming danger of contracting the virus and economic downturn, we have been forced to adjust and try to continue with our lives—even with a little semblance of normalcy. Libraries and schools are just some of the key institutions that grapple with the concept and realization of this “new normal.” In this time of pandemic, libraries may

have been physically inaccessible to users for health and safety reasons, but their role and responsibility are seen to be more crucial than ever. The onset of the pandemic had unfolded interesting information behavior and sensemaking of the situation as people actively and inactively sought information related to the virus (Tandoc & Lee, 2020). Hence, libraries are called to provide remote information services and assistance to their users, and develop programs that would put media and information literacy at the forefront especially when it comes to consuming and disseminating information related to COVID-19. Various initiatives were and are being done by libraries all over the world as their immediate and continuing response to this global health crisis. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) earnestly publicized its world digital library for everyone to access and use during this perilous time (Elouahsoussi, 2020), and started to call for collaborations with member associations to mobilize media and information literacy with the use of free resources (UNESCO, 2020). International library associations have also compiled and made available different resources related to the pandemic such as an updated listing of resources for academic libraries focusing on distance learning and engagement made by the Association of College and Research Libraries

(ACRL, 2020), and pandemic preparedness resources for libraries by the American Library Association (ALA, 2020). Aside from free information resources, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions also issued a guide that can be used by libraries towards their reopening (IFLA, 2020; Ojala, 2020). Indeed, the international library and information community actively took action by providing information, maintaining library services through remote assistance and digital migration of services, prioritizing health concerns, fostering collaborations with stakeholders as well as public health agencies and publishers for wider dissemination of and access to health information resources, and counteracting the spread of dis/misinformation (Kosciejew, 2020).

Libraries in the Philippines likewise responded to the crisis by collecting COVID-19 resources and making them available to the public. For instance, the National Library of the Philippines came up with a list of free e-resources (NLP, 2020), the University of the Philippines Manila Library provided information on and links to free databases containing contents and materials related to COVID-19 (UPM Library, 2020), and the De La Salle University also launched a COVID-19 research portal that is regularly updated (DLSU, 2020). The University of the Philippines Diliman Library also issued a set of guidelines and assistance to faculty and students to access library resources in UP Diliman (UPD Library, 2020). The importance of public libraries was also recognized by some public officials during this pandemic (Casayuran, 2020; Casas, 2020). In this situation, public libraries could provide free spaces in the continuous learning of the community despite the pandemic, such as the Quezon City Public Library's initiative of offering free online classes on topics ranging from sciences to humanities (Pedrajas, 2020).

As we are all adjusting to the “new” normal with these aforementioned actions and initiatives, how would libraries continuously adapt and move forward? What could be the collective agenda for libraries to pursue as they gradually reopen their (physical and/or virtual) doors? What are the priorities and arrangements that could be done even during the post-pandemic period? At this point, most libraries and other cultural institutions in the Philippines remain closed, and as mentioned earlier, some of them continue to operate and render information services remotely. While remote access to library services and resources has been around for quite some time even before the pandemic hit the world, this mode of providing services to our library clientele is now seen to be more essential than before especially that educational institutions were suddenly pressed to shift to flexible and online learning, teaching and content delivery. However, in developing countries such as the Philippines where digital divide widely prevails, not everyone can fully adapt to this modality and many are being left behind. Many libraries in the country are also facing the same dilemma of having limited resources and access to technologies—and this pandemic has made this unfortunate reality more evident. While it would be ideal if the entire library community does its best to confront and overcome these challenges, we still have to acknowledge that libraries and all our goals and functions do not exist in a vacuum. There is a need for a steady and strong support from the entire community, government and concerned institutions, including publishers and internet service providers. If libraries are to provide people with spaces where they can freely access reliable information, they must be provided with better infrastructures, faster and cost-efficient internet connectivity, and ability to liberally disseminate information from credible sources and research studies. Reasonable copyright policies should also be in place for

libraries to be authorized to give copies or access to the needed materials by their clients in these challenging times. Making these information readily available by reputable publishers in coordination with libraries can be a quick and good response to critical situations such as what we are currently experiencing. Also, training and development of librarians on how they can effectively respond to crisis through the use of right information and facilities must be done and likewise prioritized.

For many years, libraries have been lobbying for fair access to technologies and information, removal of unreasonable paywalls, control of the spread of mis/disinformation, and availability of safeguards to protect the health and well-being of librarians and our clients. We should continue promoting these and make them as the core of our agenda during and post-pandemic. The collective new agenda in the “new” normal goes beyond the actual operations done by the libraries to serve their direct users—it is about having a national policy on information and libraries, obtaining extensive and sustainable support, and fostering more collaborations. This agenda is actually not entirely new, but rather a continuous one that needs to be strengthened. Libraries should be envisioned as spaces that care for their librarians and clients, help bridge digital divide, raise responsible and informed citizens, and empower communities.

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