

Public Libraries and COVID: Perceptions and Politics in the United States

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Abstract

Public librarians across the U.S. found themselves in different political environments that challenged their ability to serve their communities, to provide the information that was needed, and to fight disinformation regarding the pandemic. Researchers at the University of Missouri examined how and what librarians communicated to the public about COVID. A survey was sent to a systematic sample of libraries from all states and service area sizes, carried out from January 24 to February 7, 2022. A total of 106 responses were received, with 66 respondents having answered every question. Analysis of closed- and open-ended survey responses points to public librarians' concerns about 1) local government officials and their decisions, 2) resistance on the part of patrons to accurate information, and 3) problems disentangling the local conversation from national media (and social media) perspectives.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a challenging time for public librarians as public service providers. In the United States, there have been varied beliefs about the disease itself and how people should act in their daily lives. Furthermore, the disease was politicized from the earliest days, which complicated practical responses to mitigate its spread. As with other public sector workers, public librarians had to make decisions about how to best serve their communities. Librarians seek to present the libraries as a politically neutral space (Scott and Saunders 2020), but the fraught and divisive atmosphere brought by the pandemic made it difficult to provide needed information. There were (and still remain) many unknowns surrounding the disease. Librarians' normal information sources were constantly changing, and local health agencies were overwhelmed, reducing their effectiveness as sources for information.

In the U.S. as the pandemic was unfolding, misinformation and disinformation were rampant, engendering fear and distrust (Salvi et al. 2021). The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) was intended to be a neutral source of information, interfacing with groups like the World Health Organization (WHO) and promoting restrictions such as mask mandates in the interest of public health. Misinformation persisted, though. While this was partially due to the changing science (what was known) during the pandemic, it was also exacerbated by the politicization of the pandemic, with Americans' views of pandemic information quality sharply split on political lines (Deane, Parker, and Gramlich 2021). Further, exactly how a person defines

misinformation regarding COVID is likely defined by the media that they consume, and the sensationalism that sells media is often stoked by fear. Researchers (Salvi et al. 2021) found that people wanted answers during the pandemic, and that they were particularly vulnerable to misinformation because they were afraid.

One mission of public libraries is to provide accurate and unbiased information to the public. Libraries adopt and refine collection development policies in order to put good, relevant information on the shelves, or to subscribe to databases of vetted information. The Internet complicated matters; opening the internet to general users in the 1990's gave anyone infinite possibilities for creating and spreading false information. This brought information literacy to librarians' agendas, but mostly in K-16 settings. Information literacy seemed simple then. Users were instructed to inspect top-level domains (e.g., .com = bad; .gov or .edu = good), check for a professional appearance, and check the date. This method is still sometimes taught as the CRAAP test (Currency, Relevancy, Authority, Accuracy, Purpose) (Batchelor 2017).

While much has been written about libraries' management of patron services during the pandemic (e.g., Grassel 2020; Alajmi and Albudaiwi 2021; Lenstra and D'Arpa 2021) our focus is on whether or how politics and external factors influenced libraries' information sharing practices and maintenance of employee health and morale in light of the overarching problems of misinformation and disinformation. It is sometimes impossible to distinguish real from fake or good from bad. Aside from overt manipulation of information (e.g.,

deep fakes), information providers, carriers, and our own habits have contributed to separate information spheres in which one person's reality could conceivably be completely different from another's, and realities are more closely associated with ideological boundaries. From this perspective, we developed the following research questions:

- Were public librarians' practices regarding the provision of COVID-19 information and programming influenced by state politics, local sentiment, or professional norms, and if so, how?
- What obstacles did public librarians face during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Literature Review

This literature review begins with a focus on public library practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, briefly summarizing libraries' patron-facing practices during the pandemic. We then look at the pre-pandemic relationship between libraries and politics, to explore how public libraries have dealt with political pressures. We conclude with a discussion of misinformation and disinformation and how those factors have affected public library practice.

Public Libraries' Pandemic Practices

In mid-March of 2020, almost all nonessential businesses and services shut down physical facilities in order to slow the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Like many other sectors' employees, librarians almost immediately began working from home. The Public Library Association, in partnership with the Public

Library Data Alliance, conducted a survey in March of 2020 (Public Libraries Association 2020) and found that 98% of public libraries closed their doors to the public, but that lending activities had increased. Open-ended responses to the survey found that librarians continued to provide information services, created take-home activities, expanded access to resources, checked out technology and expanded public WIFI outside of the building, supported distance learning, and coordinated distribution of emergency supplies to the community. However, only 17% said that they were providing resources related to COVID.

Another study (Connaway et al. 2021) of library leaders during the height of the pandemic found that the pandemic caused libraries to quickly shift tactics, but that many of the changes, such as prioritization of electronic and contactless borrowing, had already begun and will likely continue into the future. Electronic materials require devices and an internet connection, though, and the digital divide was even more apparent. Lynn Silipigni Connaway, Ixchel M. Faniel, Brittany Brannon, Joanne Cantrell, Christopher Cyr, Brooke Doyle, Peggy Gallagher, Kem Lang, Brian Lavoie, Janet Mason, and Titia van der Werf found that library patrons might not want to use ebooks, and that homeless people were more isolated than before because they lost their point of contact with their families - the library's public access computer. This same study also examined the effect of the pandemic on staff, finding that some staff were able to work from home but that others were unable to juggle competing demands on their space and attention. Working at home was difficult, but working in a shared space was traumatic. Front-line

workers feared coming into contact with the public for fear of getting or spreading the disease (Berry, Trochmann, and Millesen 2022).

Politics and Public Libraries

Mahnaz Dar (2021) explained that “Providing accurate and reliable information is a cornerstone of public librarianship, but over the last year, librarians have been especially challenged by the pandemic, the election, and the increased visibility of conspiracy theories” (para. 1). The author describes programs at six public libraries in the United States (U.S.) and Australia that were conducted either by the authors or through partnerships with social action or medical organizations to debunk fake news about elections and politics, and then about COVID and vaccinations. In the U.S., public libraries receive an average of 90% of their funding from their local communities. However, some public libraries are independent political units, while others are under the administration of their city or county. This could theoretically put them in a precarious situation, should the librarians overtly run afoul of local sentiment or belief.

Psychology articles tell us that presenting ‘good information’ to people who believe in misinformation is an approach that often backfires (Young et al. 2021). They found that public librarians do understand the complications of battling misinformation, especially in the face of political outrage, but they “face significant barriers to transforming those understandings into effective programming” (p. 541). They must make a risk calculation when choosing to engage in any real or perceived political topic, such as vaccination.

One solution Jason C. Young and colleagues (2021) proposed is engaging in partnerships that can share that risk or to share their research findings, as public librarians do not generally have the resources to carry out rigorous evaluations. Oliver Batchelor (2017) says that it is librarians' responsibility to promote library patrons' critical thinking skills. He suggests linking to research about fake news, having events to raise awareness, or referring people to nonpartisan fact-checking sites but admits that "critics on both sides of the political spectrum have accused these sites of partisanship and bias. These accusations suggest skepticism in the accusers who, themselves, may be acting out of partisanship and defensiveness" (p. 145). In short, librarians' tactics to approach misinformation are unclear, but there is a need to temper fear and division with facts.

Misinformation and Disinformation

Misinformation, disinformation, and fake news are different, yet related concepts. Misinformation is simply false or bad information, and disinformation is false information created for the sake of misleading people. Fake news is false information that mimics real news, and which is intended to deceive readers. These concepts are certainly a current concern, but they are not new; Sharon McQueen (2019) writes that Rameses II commissioned false documents of victory in the Battle of Qadash, ca. 1275 BCE. The invention of movable type allowed the reproduction and spread of misinformation, which McQueen calls an "unforeseen consequence" of the printing press. Sensationalism, a form of false news, has been used to sell newspapers since at least 1835, when Sir John

Herschel wrote a fantastic series about life on the moon. Over twenty thousand copies were sold in one week, and many people purportedly believed it was true. Current controversy around fake news, propaganda, and similar subjects centers on information and communication technology (ICT) because of concerns regarding manipulation of readers by bad actors and the speed with which it travels via social media (van der Linden, Panagopoulos, and Roozenbeek 2020; Greifeneder et al. 2021). The spread of stories (true or false) does not depend on their veracity, but the feelings it provokes in the reader and the ease with which it is shared.

The antidote to bad information is said to be good information. People turn to the internet and social media for answers about everything from plant care to life and death situations, but social media spaces are ripe for the spread of wrong information which has the potential to spread with lightning speed (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018). Theoretically, that is where librarians might play an important role; just as librarians helped patrons discern ‘good books’ from ‘bad books’ prior to the advent of the Web (Sowards 1988), they now might help people wade through the piles of misinformation that have undermined our democracy (LaPierre and Kitzie 2019) and endangered our health and mental health (Rocha et al. 2021). The World Health Organization called the spread of misinformation an ‘infodemic’ (n.d.), the concurrent proliferation of media that was spread through social media and other venues and which preyed on susceptible information seekers (Salvi et al. 2021). Libraries might host events

that fight the infodemic by inviting experts who can answer questions and present scientifically validated studies on current problematic topics.

Young and colleagues (2021) propose a research agenda for public libraries' ability to respond to misinformation and explained that thus far, "many of the arguments in the literature have been more aspirational than empirical in nature, [but] examples of library interventions have slowly begun to emerge" (p. 540). They explain that combating misinformation is complicated; human beings do not simply see the light when presented with 'good information'. M. Connor Sullivan (2019), though, explains that librarians cannot fight fake news, as information literacy strategies are less effective than the technological prowess of fake news producers, and the tenacity of psychological factors that play into beliefs about misinformation.

Method

Between January 24 and February 7, 2022, a systematic sample of 983 libraries from all fifty states was conducted. Libraries were chosen from the *American Library Directory*, and email contact information was gathered either from the directory or from the library's website or contact form. Surveys were distributed to library administrators' email addresses using Qualtrics. By the end of the two-week period, respondents provided 106 responses from 38 states distributed across the continental U.S. The survey consisted of 38 questions, some of which were part of decision trees from previous questions. Participants could choose to skip questions, but 66 respondents answered every question.

The survey collected information about the type of library, location, political context, staff attitudes and processes, and impact of local, state, and national policy on decision making. Additional questions focused on respondents' opinions on providing data, information, and resources to users, as well as their understanding of using open data and open science resources. This paper reports primarily on the questions related to political climate, policy, and health information sharing practices and programs relevant to questions surrounding information and disinformation/misinformation.

Collected responses were downloaded from Qualtrics and organized in a spreadsheet for data analysis. Open-ended answers were coded thematically, with recurring notions and sentiments identified. Binary responses, such as Yes/No answers, were also organized in Tableau by cross-referencing the state of the respondent's library with their answer to various questions. This was done to determine if the broad political climate of the state correlated with respondents' answers. In the U.S., two primary political parties exist: the Democratic Party (<https://democrats.org/>) which is generally considered to be more progressive, and the Republican Party (<https://www.gop.com/>) which is generally considered to be more conservative. A table (Table 1) of the relative political slant of state governments was created based on the most recent analysis of the National Conference of State Legislatures, a non-partisan professional organization for officials in state government (2022). This analysis is based on the composition of both state legislative houses as well as who holds the governorship.

Limitations

While 789 public library administrators were invited to participate, our response rate was only 13.4% and included only libraries in the contiguous 48 states (i.e., excluding Alaska and Hawaii). The low response rate might be attributable to pandemic or survey fatigue, but nonetheless, many of those who did respond provided rich and detailed answers to our write-in questions. Due to the limited number of responses, the current study does not claim statistical generalizability or predictability. Instead, our findings below focus on reviewing descriptive data as well as predominant themes identified in the dataset. This research does not claim to be comprehensive, national and quantitative; instead, it is exploratory and produced findings that are useful for formulating more effective responses to future public health emergencies.

Moreover, while we use state political leanings in our analysis, we recognize that states are composed of multiple communities, and each community has its own political leanings, with conservative areas in progressive states and progressive areas in conservative states. This uneven coverage may influence our results, in that we may have received a survey from a member of an outlier community within the state.

Results

In our contentious contemporary political environment, a looming question for any institution that deals with providing access to information for the general public has to do with how local and state politics impact the process of providing

this access. In libraries, the feasibility of this mission under countervailing political and social forces is seriously impacted. In this section, we combine the results of our maps and open-ended comments to illustrate public libraries' reactions to the pandemic.

The survey posed several questions asking respondents to elaborate on how political dynamics affect their ability to provide information and programming (for anonymized access to the raw survey data, please see Bossaller and colleagues (2022)). Each of the following maps (Figures 2-7) depicts the results of yes/no questions corresponding to the state in which the participants' library is located. The five possible categories of answers are "yes", "no", "null" (did not answer this question, but responded to the survey), "*" which indicates that multiple respondents from the same state provided different answers, or "x" (no responses from libraries in this state). Since some states included multiple respondent libraries, and other states included a single library or no libraries at all, our results are exploratory in nature, but provide valuable insight into the dynamics of local political impact on libraries.

Providing Health-Related Information

Effects of Practices, Policies, and Professional or Social Norms

When asked if there were specific practices, policies or professional or social norms that kept them from directing people to health-related information, respondents overwhelmingly replied no (Figure 1). Mixed responses were returned in Texas, Florida, Missouri, Arizona and other states with conservative

majorities in state government, though some like Massachusetts may be outliers. The majority-yes responses came from Washington (2 responses), Wyoming (1) and Utah (1).

Nonetheless, several respondents noted that inconsistent policies and guidelines from local government and decision-making bodies hindered their ability to serve their populations: “guidance has been challenging to track, interpret, and translate into plan or policy because of the rollercoasters of the virus itself and the disagreements about best practice and response” and “my Board was split on policies making it difficult to make decisions.” One respondent described having to create their own process: “there was no real guidance on what to do. I spent hours looking at what other libraries were doing, attending chat groups and zoom meetings through the state library, and following the Executive Orders from our State Governor to form our own COVID Policy & Procedures.”

Consistent policies and guidelines created by local administrative and governing bodies are essential in that librarians can rely on these standards and provide services accordingly. However, the issues of inconsistent or split guidelines and decisions from these administrative bodies created much confusion.

Effects of Local Sentiment and Politics

When asked if local sentiment or politics influenced their decisions about what resources to direct patrons to on their website or through programming and marketing, responses were even more mixed (Figure 2). In this case, only

Kentucky (1) and North Dakota (1) answered yes uniformly. Progressive-leaning states like California (6) and Washington (2) returned mixed responses, as well as conservative-leaning states like Texas (2) and Missouri (4). Still, the overwhelming response to the question was “no” (81%).

Respondents’ open-ended answers illustrated how some libraries managed concerns about local sentiment and politics, as evidenced by similar comments from two separate respondents. One said, “Because of the conservative nature of our area, Covid-related decisions are fraught with peril. To avoid controversy, our library refrained from being an information resource on the pandemic.” The other said, “The library administration was concerned about liability and/or provoking the ire of members of the public. Our response to the pandemic was not to provide information about Covid to the public.”

Similar patterns resulted when asked if politics influenced decisions to direct patrons to evidence-based resources (Figure 3). While 87% of respondents indicated that politics did not influence provision of health-based resources, there were mixed results in California (Democrat), Texas (Republican), and Missouri (Republican).

Respondents to open-ended questions noted some potential tensions between their professional roles as information providers and their positions within the larger political structures of their communities. One respondent said, “as a department of the county, we are obligated to follow county regulations regarding COVID-19. This meant that even during periods of great community spread and little to no mitigation attempts, we were required to remain open for

in-person access even though we did not receive any plexiglass barriers like other county departments.” Another commented, “since we are part of the Town government, we had limitations on what we could share, as well as a need to be as neutral as we could. We displayed recommendations in the library in regard to the CDC [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] and social distancing/cover your cough, but did not share anything extra.”

Related to local sentiment, several respondents indicated that sometimes the patrons themselves were unwilling to access accurate health information: “an abundance of misinformation. You can only share information with someone who wants to receive it.” Another stated that “many locals were listening only to anti-vax and anti-mask resources, and refusing to consider the health of others in their rush to keep their ‘freedoms’ intact. They did not trust any scientific or government resources.”

In addition to misinformation transmitted through social media, some respondents noted problems in disentangling local conversations from national perspectives. They saw “mixed messages from state and local government about how to handle the situation” and noted that “our policies based on the CDC and [state] often seemed at odds with national media.” The politicized nature of the pandemic, combined with a lack of clear guidance in state or local policy and an abundance of information sources of varying quality, contributed to librarians’ feelings of frustration in their attempt to provide health information for their patrons.

Providing Health-Related Programming

Besides providing direct information, another way for librarians to inform their clientele is through informational programming, either provided by the library or in concert with other sources. When asked if their library provided programming during the pandemic, the majority of respondents said yes (68%). Mixed responses showed up in both progressive and conservative states (e.g., Missouri, California, Illinois, Indiana (Figure 4), perhaps demonstrating that local sentiment and library practice are not always aligned with state political leadership, and representing the central conflict between the political and practical responses to COVID-19.

The vast majority of written responses indicated that the programs provided during the pandemic were not health-related; however, 11 respondents did indicate providing a variety of health-related programming, including programs to support mental health, exercise (e.g., at-home yoga), and healthy eating. Two respondents specifically mentioned providing programming related to vaccinations, though others participated in mask giveaways. Both respondents from Texas reported that they did not provide programming or programming related specifically to public health topics during the pandemic, as did respondents from Nevada, Georgia, Massachusetts, and others.

When asked whether politics or local sentiment influenced libraries' provision of health-related programming (Figure 5), 89% of respondents said that politics did not influence the provision of health information, though again there were mixed results in California, Arizona, Texas, and Missouri. Of the 11% who

indicated that politics did influence their programming, the majority felt that the influence was focused on pandemic denial. One said, “The prevailing attitude here was/is that the pandemic is over-publicized. Other than a small population considered fanatical, no one else had any interest in health information related programs. And the ‘fanatical’ population got all their information from the internet.” Nevertheless, one librarian did indicate that the community used their facility as a vaccination site, suggesting that local politics influenced their programming to enhance public health.

Collaboration with Local Health Officials

Another way of ensuring accuracy of information is referring information seekers to authoritative sources. We asked respondents if their libraries had collaborated with state or local government health officials in any capacity for programming or informational purposes, to which 55% answered yes and 45% answered no (Figure 6). Many respondents did collaborate with their local or state officials, including respondents in Washington, New Mexico, Maine, Georgia, Montana, Kentucky, and Tennessee. Arizona, California, Florida, Illinois, Michigan, and other states all had mixed responses. In written responses, multiple libraries indicated providing at-home COVID testing kits and sharing information from local health departments. Other respondents indicated that the local health department provided workshops for library staff, both for staff health and for vaccination promotion. One library worked with a public health nurse who consolidated local information in order to maintain the most up-to-date pandemic

response. Another indicated that they made cloth masks for their community members and organized health care worker appreciation programs.

Providing Health Information in an Atmosphere of Fear, Uncertainty, and Doubt

As suggested in previously published literature (such as Salvi et al. 2021), disinformation can be spread more easily in an atmosphere of fear, uncertainty, and doubt. Respondents to our survey very explicitly noted an atmosphere of fear and confusion which affected both library employees and potential patrons. The fact that librarians were expected to provide newly implemented, revised, or even diversified library services within the severely limited physical resources and facilities created much concern to librarians about their safety, time, effort, and budget. In some cases, the ability to implement protocols to protect themselves was mediated by the communities in which they were located. As one respondent noted, “management was slow to respond to the immediate needs of librarians on the front lines and expect more from them than is safe.”

Several libraries suffered from the lack of protective gear for librarians, as well as encountering patrons who refuse to wear masks during the state mask mandate: “we also had difficulty maintaining enough masks to meet patron demand once we initially reopened. We were lucky to get plexiglass barriers just in time before reopening to the public, due to supply chain issues.” While the physical safety and protection of librarians was a significant concern, another commonly mentioned concern was librarians’ emotional burden from handling the overall pandemic situations: “mental exhaustion from the staff during the

height of the pandemic and the transition back to normal services was very evident. Having to make such a dramatic change to our services so quickly was difficult, seeing as libraries plan so far in advance for things. Finding the best ways to reach our patrons and continue to provide everything we could for them was very taxing at times.”

Both library staff and patrons experienced considerable fear, as evidenced by several comments. Library employees in some states were activated as disaster response workers. As they expressed it, “well, fear was certainly [an obstacle], fear and anxiety from staff and also from patrons.” They felt fear of “getting covid! fear as an essential worker” and also noted “the fear our elderly experienced that forced them to not come back in when we opened back up.”

One commenter mentioned a variety of factors that were concerning, including inconsistent guidance and direction from superiors, internal factors such as employee management, and external factors of patron relationship management: “fear from staff, navigating lack of guidance and/or enforcement from higher levels of government, lack of respect for masking from the public, balancing time needed to address COVID-related issues with the ‘normal’ job duties.”

Multiple respondents mentioned the challenges of working with patrons, particularly in enforcing mask mandates. As indicated by the last respondent, patrons were not always amenable to following rules, which reinforced fear. For example: “anti-mask and anti-vax patrons,” “being face-to-face with COVID-positive patrons,” and said that “a few members of the community refused to wear

masks during the state mask mandate, causing our Security personnel to encounter high risk, challenging situations that resulted in law enforcement responses. These instances accounted for a minority of issues, but created stress and controversy for staff and patrons.” Another explained that “trying to enforce mask usage was extremely difficult for patrons and staff. Library staff have been wearing masks since returning to work after the initial closure. The disregard and disrespect of some members of the public is unbelievable! Interactions with difficult patrons resulted in one of our librarians leaving the library to become self-employed.”

While only one respondent mentioned librarian attrition, employment sources (such as Melo, 2022) do indicate that experienced librarians left their positions. Although not related to disinformation per se, the stress and fear engendered by working in public-facing positions during a pandemic had the potential to hinder librarians’ ability to work successfully. Additionally, the loss of experienced practitioners is a detriment to a library’s ability to provide high quality access to information and to dispel disinformation.

In public libraries, librarians practice as public servants, who provide services to their community members, prioritizing community members’ benefits. However, as librarians try to play their roles as public servants, they also fear for their safety and mental well-being, as well as those of their patrons. The difficulty of dispelling misinformation is not made easier when fear is making work more difficult.

Discussion

While the low response rate for this survey means that the experiences of the respondents cannot be generalized across the U.S., some of the results suggest some common experiences across libraries and ways those could encourage or discourage disinformation. There were several common obstacles that prevented library employees from providing optimal services, and these obstacles came from multiple fronts: members of the community, community leaders, library administrators and colleagues, and the media itself.

The lack of a consistent message from authority figures¹ was problematic for some practitioners. Our respondents also indicated that they wanted consistent and trustworthy messaging from community leaders and library administrators that prioritized employee and patron safety. Some of our respondents indicated getting conflicting messages from city or library administrators, who wanted librarians to engage in business as usual, and media indicating that the pandemic health threat still remained.

The decision to share pandemic-related information was often mediated by the communities in which they were located, which indirectly affected their abilities to combat disinformation. Public libraries were bound by the structures that were in place locally. The extent to which information could be shared and disinformation diminished was limited – while many librarians felt confident

¹ The *New York Times* has published a series of articles documenting the failure of the CDC to communicate effectively, especially during the early days of the pandemic. For example, “For its part, the C.D.C. said yesterday that its public guidance on Covid was ‘confusing and overwhelming.’”: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/18/briefing/monkeypox-cdc-walensky-covid.html?smid=url-share>

sharing CDC or local health department recommendations, some reported that they felt the need to limit sharing of other information for fear of pushback from community leaders or community members. In addition to what librarians felt comfortable sharing, there was also the issue of what patrons had access to. One respondent noted that their area had limited technological capacity, meaning online information would not be as useful as interpersonal contact; however, interpersonal contact was not always possible given building closures.

Public health data were often reported at the national level by large media outlets, and even data reported at the state level was not always helpful for respondents. Many indicated wanting information specific to their own communities to help them make the best decisions for those communities, and at least two respondents indicated that they went to great lengths to get local data, including closely liaising with public health departments and analyzing public health data to predict trends within their communities. Moreover, the decline of local news media prior to and during the pandemic left many people living in “news deserts” without access to local public health information. “Americans find their local news sources significantly more credible than national news sources” (Sullivan 2021, para. 17). When people lack local data and local reporting, a trusted source is lost.

The uncertainty and change in routine meant that some of our respondents were unable to spend time researching local data and sharing information because they had to spend more time figuring out how to create safe modifications to their existing services. They reported having to install plexiglass dividers, creating and

enforcing building capacity policies, developing curbside services, and creating online programming to meet their patrons' existing needs, while at the same time working with reduced staffing due to illness, childcare, or family care. People's capacity was stretched nationwide. Menczer and Hills (2020, para. 7) report that as users' attention becomes limited, misinformation is more likely to be shared. This suggests the possibility that as librarians become busier with other assignments, they may be less likely to engage in sharing and promoting accurate and verified information. Respondents were very interested in having access to current, local information from trusted sources. They believed that it was their role and responsibility to pass along good information; however, they did not all feel capable of doing the research themselves.

Beyond local public health information, librarians were concerned about appropriate practices to preserve employee and patron health and well-being. In this situation, some of our respondents suggested a role for professional leadership. A number of respondents indicated that their state libraries offered a good deal of support. Local groups and state library associations were also mentioned. Nationally, the American Library Association, Urban Library Council, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services were mentioned as sources of guidance for library practice during the pandemic. One respondent indicated: "I think it would have been helpful if an organization (such as the ALA) or our consortium were more proactive in advocating for what libraries and library workers need/ed to respond to the challenges presented throughout the pandemic."

This professional leadership may have helped some librarians in advocating for their employees as they faced administrators or community members who were less concerned about maintaining safe practices.

Conclusion

In this article, we explore the situation that public librarians navigated during the time of COVID as they attempted to be sources of information at a time and in a context that had the potential of limiting their reach and their message. On the whole, respondents to the survey expressed a willingness to collaborate with health officials to provide information and an unwillingness to allow politics in general to influence what information was provided. Though many indicated a general anxiety about repercussions for promoting health information that was contradictory to the prevailing local political sentiment, most provided the information anyway.

Findings from this study highlighted several obstacles to public librarians' provision of health-related information during the pandemic. These obstacles – 1) local governments' decisions, 2) patrons' resistance to access accurate health information, and 3) the disinformation from national and social media – were interrelated or co-occurring. Due to this, it was even more challenging for public librarians to tackle these issues independently. While the authors of this article deeply appreciated the public librarians' efforts in serving the communities amid the pandemic, it was also evident that nationwide, systematic support for public libraries/librarians was needed.

This study demonstrates that librarians know where to find national data, but that local data is more elusive; during COVID, it was not always produced. State libraries strive to maintain political neutrality, and thus serve as an ideal conduit for systematic support of health information. A key factor is untangling information from politics. COVID demonstrated the chaotic nature of data collection due to many factors, such as political will, ignorance, or a lack of resources, which points towards problems that librarians cannot be expected to solve. There is, however, an imminent need to protect public librarians from political, professional, and local community-based repercussions so that librarians can provide accurate information to the public without having to feel anxious about it. Recommendations include strengthening formal and informal professional networks outside of specific institutions, and educating board members as well as local politicians about the necessity of autonomy for libraries as institutions to function properly. Health information ought not be a political matter, and providing such information accurately and efficiently should be considered a public good and protected as such.

Acknowledgements

We thank all the public library leaders who participated in our survey, and we gratefully acknowledge funding from the Institute of Museum & Library Services (APRML-250568-OMLS-22).

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