

COVID-19 and the Global Library Field: Staying Safe at Home and at Work



Staying safe at home and at work

In the light of the above, the WHO recommends in general that people should practice respiratory etiquette (for example, by coughing into a flexed elbow, or a tissue that they immediately throw away). People should also wash their hands or use an alcohol-based rub frequently, and not touch their faces, as well as maintaining distance from anyone who is coughing or sneezing. Known COVID-19 hotspots should be avoided, especially if you, or those you live with, are older or otherwise vulnerable (for example, you or they have diabetes, heart or lung disease).

People with mild symptoms who are otherwise healthy should self-isolate and contact their medical provider or a COVID-19 information line for advice on testing and referral. People with fever, cough or difficulty breathing should call their doctor and seek medical attention.

There are many more resources available on the [WHO website](#). Furthermore, in precedence to the information given below, we encourage libraries to seek advice from your national public health agency, and of course to follow the guidance that already exists.

Handling materials

A key question for many in the library field has been around the risk of infection through contact with materials carrying coronavirus. Clearly our understanding of any aspect of how the virus is spread is still at an early stage, and so it is not possible to offer definitive advice, other than the universal recommendations on keeping hands clean and not touching faces.

There is some emerging research (in the [New England Journal of Medicine](#), and the [Journal of Hospital Infection](#)) into the survival of the virus, both in the air and on different types of surface. It appears that it survives for longer on plastics and steel, and for less long on cardboard or copper, although these tests took place in laboratory conditions and infection risk does fall over time.

A [webinar](#) organised by the Institute of Museum and Library Services in the United States echoed this, suggesting that the risk from paper was low, with hard, regularly touched services posing more of a risk. Nonetheless, where there is a chance that a book or other piece of equipment has been in close contact with someone ill, it may be appropriate to wait or use safe cleaning practices. The [general recommendation](#) remains to take care – a point also echoed by the [French government](#).

In the light of this, we are aware that some libraries have imposed a wait period before handling returned books, while others have made it clear that no-one is expected to return books until things return to normal. Outside of the library field – for example in postal services – there seems to be no advice against handling paper or cardboard. What does seem more likely is that other surfaces – such as door handles, keyboards, mice, toys, CDs and DVDs, or VR headsets – could carry the virus, and so should be regularly cleaned or removed from circulation. As a result, Public Health England has [suggested](#) that the risk posed by cardboard can be considered negligible after 24 hours, and plastic after 72 hours.

Where materials could be harmed by use of alcoholic gels or cleaning materials, basic hygiene measures, such as washing hands thoroughly with soap and water, avoiding touching the face, and staying away if displaying symptoms of COVID-19 appear advisable. As highlighted by the U.S. [Library of Congress](#), time itself is a good disinfectant.

Social Distancing

More and more countries are encouraging citizens to practice ‘social distancing’ – keeping a safe distance between individuals in order to reduce the risks of the virus passing from one person to another. The recommended distance varies from country to country but appears not to be below 1.5m (5ft).

To allow this, some libraries have stopped programmes which would see people spend longer periods together, in particular those which bring together people who are more vulnerable to the disease. Others have closed reading rooms or are only allowing people to collect books on appointment, either inside or outside of the building – for example setting up tables, or even with a drive-through service. Still others are planning how to provide book deliveries to vulnerable groups, while taking full account of the need to safeguard health.

Elsewhere, where it is felt that bringing people together brings too much of a risk, libraries have closed and gone fully online, or found other means of sharing physical copies of books as safely as possible – for example, [Radford College School library in Australia](#) has a click-and-collect service for books, while [Lane Cove \(also in Australia\)](#) and [Godoy Cruz](#) library in Argentina are doing deliveries, and on [Svalbard](#), the library is working with taxi companies to give access to books.

Nonetheless, for many libraries it may be impossible to meet social distancing standards. In the [United States for example](#), where there is no national order to close, we have seen libraries proactively ask authorities for closures where they feel that the risk to users and staff is too high.



Providing services remotely

Libraries around the world of all sorts have been working hard to provide access to collections and services remotely. All types of library have promoted their digital services – for example, the Bibliothèque nationale de France is organising [virtual exhibitions](#), and the National Library of Spain is [promoting](#) its digital content that can be used to support education, the National Library of Morocco is providing [free eBooks](#), and the Public Library in Aarhus, Denmark, has put its digital content at the front of its [website](#), while the [Granby library in Quebec, Canada](#) is highlighting content focused on learning new skills. Building on its SimplyE app, [New York Public Library](#) is running online book clubs.

[School libraries](#) are also working hard to provide materials in a format that allows parents to support their children's education at home, while in Iraq, the [Al-Abbas Holy Shrine library](#) is providing a remote lending service for researchers giving access to electronic resources.

Many public and school libraries are promoting **online storytimes**, where they can find a solution to copyright concerns. There have also been major efforts to boost access to eBooks, for example by **increasing the number of eBooks that people can borrow** at any given time (in Denmark), and by [reassigning budgets](#) to pay for electronic content.

Others are **putting existing activities online and inventing new ones**. The Library of Congress for example is organising a [virtual transcribathon](#) in order to engage people at distance, while the National Library of Norway is encouraging users to [access its podcasts](#) while in-person events are not possible.

[Vega la Camocha public library](#) in Spain has set up a book-themed Gymkhana in order to keep children involved in reading and to help out parents with keeping them entertained, [Arlington Public Library](#) in the U.S. is working with local children and artists to produce 'quaranzines'. Aarhus Public Library has a music quiz, [writing competition](#), alongside online [poetry slams](#), [online homework help](#) and public debates. Danish libraries have set up an online **Ask-a-Librarian reference service** - and Aarhus has a service just for [children](#).

Similarly in academic libraries, there are efforts to provide remote access, for example through **online book requests** at the East-West University in Bangladesh, or through call-in hours at [Rhodes University, South Africa](#).

Some libraries are also looking to help out potential **users who are not yet registered**, and who cannot now sign up in person. The [National Library of Estonia](#) for example has established means for giving people access to books without contact, while the [National Library of Morocco](#) is also maintaining online inscriptions. The Cultuurconnect organisation in Belgium, which works with libraries, has also opened up its content to unregistered users, as has [Booklist](#) in the United States, which works to provide book reviews and other materials.

In many countries, libraries' offer of free **WiFi** to users is a key part of their offer. In the [United States](#), there has been a call on libraries to leave networks on so that users can access the internet from their cars if needs be. Others are offering access to [Zoom subscriptions](#) in order to help library users stay in touch with friends.

With so many services on offer, libraries in a number of countries have been able to work with newspapers, radio stations and other communications channels in order to raise awareness.

Available resources

Many libraries are seeing a major increase in interest in digital resources (for example in the [United Kingdom](#)), leading in some cases already to the re-prioritisation of resources from physical to digital materials. In Denmark for example, lending limits have been increased to allow users to access more eBooks at the same time.

Clearly the possibility to use resources online depends a lot on the terms under which they are accessed. Fortunately, a lot of publishers and vendors have taken helpful initiatives. In the academic field, many have provided **open access** to materials related to COVID-19. Others have facilitated access by making it **easier to log-in and access materials** from outside of official networks.

There have also been welcome steps from major trade publishers such as Macmillan and Penguin Random House to make it easier for public libraries to buy and access **eBooks for lending**, and Audible is providing access to hundreds of [audiobooks](#). See our section on [library partners](#) below for more.

Other information providers, such as the [Internet Archive](#), have also made large volumes of materials available with fewer limits to support learners, researchers and others to access information in difficult times. The [Hathi Trust](#) is also allowing libraries to lend out digitised copies of books that they own in hard copy.

Beyond this, there are many great **freely available resources** available with educational materials – notably [Open Education Resources Commons](#), which provides access to materials curated by a team of librarians. [UNESCO's Education Division](#) is also providing links to valuable educational resources, and its Archives have a [collection of sound recordings](#) from the past.

In particular, there are resources for teaching **media and information literacy** online – this is both a traditional area of strength for libraries, and a skill that is particularly necessary in the current circumstances. One example is the MOOC hosted on the [Commonwealth of Learning](#) platform. Many university libraries are also increasing their offer of training on [information literacy](#) in order to help students having to carry out their research online.

Nonetheless, it is important that all rightholders take steps to ensure that access to information for research, education and culture can continue as best possible. A number of associations and groups, including the [International Coalition of Library Consortia](#), and the [Association of University Library Directors](#) in France have called on publishers to facilitate access to works, while Italian librarians have established a [petition](#) requesting stronger efforts to provide access, Spanish ones have underlined the need to move faster towards [Open Access](#), and [JISC](#) in the United Kingdom has set out some basic practices it hopes all publishers and vendors will adopt. IFLA itself has [led efforts](#) to encourage the World Intellectual Property Office to underline how balanced intellectual property laws can help favour access. .

Library associations and other groups are working to secure better access. The [Australian Library and Information Association](#) and [Libraries Ireland](#) have negotiated agreements with national publishers and authors to ensure that public libraries can take story-times online without worrying about infringing copyright. Following prompts from libraries, [Canadian publishers](#) have also waived licensing fees.

Elsewhere, In the [United States](#), Canada, [Australia](#), and the [United Kingdom](#), there is now helpful guidance on what may or may not be possible under copyright law.

Finally, and faced with the need to invest in new content and services in order to support users, the American Library Association has [successfully argued](#) for libraries to be included in the economic stimulus package announced by the government there. Similarly, some other library funders such as [IMLS](#) in the United States are offering grantees extra flexibility.

Managing remote working

With libraries and library associations closing offices – where they have them – many in the library field are facing challenges around how to manage remote working effectively.

Clearly the best situation is where it has been possible to plan in advance, ensuring that all staff have the tools and training necessary to work effectively and safely from home, and that you can stay in touch easily. With many in the same situation, there are lots of materials available on the internet already, with a strong focus on regular contacts and maintaining good spirits and motivation. Yet with it unclear how long restrictions will last, it is always worth having plans in place for how to cope with longer-term impacts.

Some associations are supporting efforts to share ideas on how to do this most effectively, for example in the [United States](#) – see in particular the [webinar](#) on the topic – or in [Latin America](#), alongside reflections about how best to serve users in general. There are also helpful ideas from [Blue Shield Australia](#) about how to continue with conservation activities during lockdown. Library associations too are looking at how they can continue their work to support members. The Latvian Library Association has placed its conference online and is running a series of virtual events and a social media campaign. The Library and Information Association of New Zealand – Te Aotearoa has set up [virtual drop-in sessions](#) for librarians for librarians, as has the [Australian Library and Information Association](#). ENSSIB in France is running a [series of webinars](#) on different aspects of the impact of the crisis on libraries, while [Public Libraries 2030](#) in Europe is working with the University of South Carolina LIS school to share training materials also. See the section on [library associations](#) below for more.

Reassigning library resources

Where libraries have closed and demand for certain services has dropped, library personnel have been active in taking up other roles. In Ireland, for example, library staff have been seconded to help with contact tracing. Across the [United Kingdom](#), there are lots of examples of librarians moving to work at contact centres for people in isolation, helping to ensure those often at most risk keep contact with the outside world. Elsewhere, librarians have [volunteered](#) with community initiatives, or, as in Mexico, are working to improve the quality of Wikipedia articles about people from under-represented groups.

In Kansas, library laptops and WiFi hotspots have been made available to the local homeless shelter, faced with the rise in the number of people losing their homes, while [Toledo, Ohio](#), has donated its vehicles, [Edmonton, Canada](#) its equipment, [Richland Library, South Carolina](#), is sharing its hand sanitiser stations. Richland is also looking to provide key resources for people facing unemployment, as is [Indianapolis Public Library](#). [St Louis County Library](#) is offering drive-

thru meals for children, as is the [Cincinnati Public Library](#) and some Toronto Public Libraries are now acting as [food banks](#). Meanwhile school libraries in [Oklahoma City](#) are handing out books to children. [Penn State University library](#) is giving laptops and other equipment out to students who would otherwise not be able to continue to study from home.

Library spaces and equipment have also been repurposed, with libraries in [San Francisco](#) serving as childcare facilities for the children of key workers and Loussac Library in [Anchorage, Alaska](#) serving as the emergency coordination centre, while in [Spokane, Oregon](#), the library is acting as a homeless shelter, and in [San Luis Obispo, California](#), the library carpark is being made available as a safe space for people forced to live in their cars. In [Oakland, California](#), bookdrops are being used now to collect spare masks.

In Klaipėda, Lithuania, thanks to a cooperation between the National Library and the School of Robotics, library 3D printers are being used to [print 3D protective equipment](#) and items such as [door-handles](#). Libraries in the [United States](#), [Canada](#) and [New Zealand](#) are doing likewise, while [Columbia University](#) is sharing approved designs for these so that anyone with a 3D printer can help. Preservation departments in American libraries are [donating](#) existing equipment.

This is not to forget books! The [State Library of Western Australia's](#) offer of 'mystery boxes' of library materials was rapidly over-subscribed, and Kansas City Library in the U.S. has been delivering bags of books to deprived areas.

Actions by Associations, National Libraries and library partners

Associations and Library Authorities

Library associations themselves are doing great work to inform their members and support them in difficult times. Many have set up pages with **lists of reliable sources and guidance** at the national level – complementing advice at the global or regional levels – and encouraged **communication and coordination between library directors** in order to share ideas and practice. Others are providing useful support for planning, both for the management of staff and buildings, and for the development of online services, through useful checklists and courses. See in particular the following association pages:

Australia: [Australian Libraries Responding to COVID-19](#). ALIA has also made its [Professional Development Postings](#) freely available for the duration of the crisis, has launched a [page of activities](#) continuing during the pandemic, and is preparing a [relief fund](#).

Belgium: [Libraries and Archives Should Close for Visitors](#) (in Dutch)

Brazil: [Resource page](#) on COVID-19 (in Portuguese), and shortly a list of actions

Bulgaria: [Resources](#) for Librarians in Responding to COVID-19 (in Bulgarian)

Colombia: the Association of Colombian Librarians prepared a [webinar](#) (in Spanish, working with the IFLA LAC Section) on ideas on how librarians can respond

France: [Library Services and Public Health](#) (in French)

Germany: [Information page](#) on Libraries and COVID-19 from the German Library Association (in German). See also the [page on remote service provision](#), and the [press release](#) which likely inspired national media coverage of library services.

Korea (Republic of): [Statement](#) on the Coronavirus Situation

Italy: [Where to Find Information](#) (in Italian)

Netherlands: Dutch libraries have created a [page](#) of resources and activities for members (translation available into [English](#)).

New Zealand: [COVID-19 Coronavirus and the New Zealand LIS Sector](#)

Puerto Rico: The Association of Librarians of Puerto Rico has launched a [campaign](#) around misinformation about COVID-19 (in Spanish)

Spain: the Network of Academic Libraries has prepared a [resource page](#) (in Spanish)

United Kingdom: [CILIP Coronavirus Information Service](#). CILIP has also [written](#) alongside others to the government to ask for relaxation of copyright laws, and has launched its [National Shelf Service](#) – a series of daily YouTube videos full of book recommendations for children and families.

United States: [Pandemic Preparedness toolkit](#). See also the resources gathered by ALA's [Public Programs Office](#), and the webinar on [remote service provision](#). There is also this [resource page](#) prepared by the American Association of Law Libraries, and this [page](#) on pandemic preparedness by the American Association of School Libraries.

Furthermore, the Chinese Library Society has worked with the National Library to provide online learning while the Latvian Library Association has turned its conference into an online event combined with a social media campaign.

Other associations and organisations are active. CLIR has organised resources on COVID-19 on a [special page](#), while the [Association of Research Libraries](#) has analysis of what academic and research libraries in the US and Canada are doing. The [African Library and Information Association \(AfLIA\)](#) is collecting examples of what libraries are doing in Africa and has a [page](#) on how libraries can respond plus a [resource page](#), as is [Infotecarios](#) in Latin America (working with the Colombian Librarians' Association (ASCOLBI) and [LIBER](#) in academic libraries in Europe.

The Dutch Reading Foundation has a [page](#) with resources and ideas on how to support literacy and reading at home, including podcasts, meetings with children's illustrators, and of course access to eBooks through libraries.

Meanwhile, the Association for the Promotion of School Documentary Services in Quebec has provided members with tools they can use to ensure that libraries are integrated in plans to provide remote learning, , while the Every Library Institute has set up regular [chats](#) and an [emergency fund](#) to help libraries in difficulty. .

National Libraries

National libraries can also play an important role in providing access to content. In China, for example, the **national digital library** has been reinforced in order to deal with the increase in demand and has waived fines for borrowed materials which cannot be returned. In Korea, too, the national digital library has seen a major increase in use.

Some libraries have been able to negotiate the possibility to give wider access to legal deposit content for researchers and schools in Norway, and for researchers in the [Czech Republic](#) (alongside university libraries).

Others are putting activities online. The Library of Congress for example is organising a [virtual transcribathon](#) in order to engage people at distance, while the Bibliothèque nationale de France is organising [virtual exhibitions](#). The [National Library of Estonia](#) has established means for giving people access to books without contact (with resulting [major increases](#) in demand), while the National Library of Spain is [promoting](#) its digital content that can be used to support education. The National Library of Norway is encouraging users to [access its podcasts](#) while in-person events are not possible, as is the [Library of Congress of Argentina](#) alongside a variety of new content.

The [National Library of Luxembourg](#), is making it possible to obtain a library card for three months by email, without the usual ID checks, in order to facilitate access, while the [National Library of Morocco](#) is maintaining both online inscriptions alongside ISBN and legal deposit services. The National Library of Lithuania is working with the School of Robotics to promote printing of personal protective equipment in public libraries across the country.

Others are working to support national library fields in general, with the National Library of Sri Lanka for example preparing and sharing guidance with libraries across the country, while the National Library of the Czech Republic has produced an [infographic](#) on handling returned

works. The Directorate General for Libraries in Portugal has a [page](#) full of information and resources.

Meanwhile, some national libraries with a role in supporting parliamentary decision-making have continued to produce legislative dossiers providing an overview of what is going on, such as in [Argentina](#). Dedicated parliamentary libraries too have been [working](#) to support the work of their institutions.

Library Partners

There have been very welcome moves by publishers, vendors and others working with libraries to facilitate access to content even when library buildings are forced to close. As set out in the statement by the IFLA President and Secretary-General, it is to be hoped that such steps are generalised as we all look to work together to allow learning, research and access to culture to continue.

A key step has been to allow remote access to content which normally would be restricted to on-site users. [VitalSource](#) has worked with its publisher partners to broaden access to materials using only an email address to log-in, as has [ProQuest](#) through eBook Central and [Springer](#) through extended log-in periods, while the [Journal of the American Medical Association](#) is also allowing for much more off-site access, as are sites such as [ancestry.com](#). [Michigan University Press](#) is allowing read (but not download) access to much of its content. Children's publisher [Collins](#) in the UK is making content previously limited to on-site access available remotely. There are also positive examples from [Latvia](#) and Kenya.

Others are simply making more content openly available, or are reducing prices. [Project MUSE](#) has announced that materials from 9 university presses will be freely available for a number of months, while Cambridge University Press is offering [access to textbooks](#) in html format.

For public libraries in the United States, Macmillan has [suspended limits](#) recently imposed on library access to new eBook publications. Penguin Random House is offering [specific discounts](#) for public and school libraries. Overdrive and RB Books are also making it possible to have more copies of a single eBook on loan simultaneously. Also in the US, [Booklist](#) – a collection of book reviews and other resources which help in teaching and other engagement around books – has also been made available to all. Responding to another frequently encountered challenge, Libraries Connected in the UK has produced a [list of publishers](#) who are allowing online storytimes.

Some publishers have also been ready to take account of the fact that some libraries may simply not be able to make payments at the moment, for example [Bristol University Press](#).

IFLA's acknowledges its own publishing partner – SAGE – which has announced interventions including removing the subscription gateway to a number of articles and created and committed to the [Wellcome coordinated statement](#) on COVID-19-related materials, and is promoting its free online course on '[How to Get Published](#)'. A key sponsor – OCLC – has also released a [resource page](#).

Like others (for example, [Emerald](#), [Springer Nature](#), [Elsevier](#), [Oxford University Press](#), [Cambridge University Press](#), [ZBW – Leibniz Information Centre for Economics](#) and [MIT Press](#)), SAGE is also concentrating and sharing resources on COVID-19 and managing pandemics through a [microsite](#). The [White House](#) has taken a major step to facilitate text and data mining to help find solutions by releasing 29 000 papers for analysis.

Communicating with users in different languages

IFLA's Library Services to Multicultural Populations Section is working with the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) to develop [translated signage](#) and text to support libraries

communicating with their linguistically diverse communities, particularly in relation to library closures and accessing online information. These resources are available in MS Word format. Libraries are welcome to adapt and use this content as best meets their needs to communicate with their community. Translations will be made available in more languages as they are developed.

Ongoing issues

IFLA is aware that the pandemic has brought up a number of wider issues which we are following closely. In addition to copyright – mentioned above – there are concerns around the impacts of the crisis on the broader culture, education and research sectors, privacy, and ensuring democratic norms are protected. We continue to monitor these issues closely and will share information and views as appropriate.

We are already active in advocacy around these issues, notably through helping to shape and then joining a [UNESCO statement](#) on documentary heritage and the COVID-19 pandemic. This stresses the potential that documentary heritage has both to instruct and comfort at times such as these, and calls on governments and others both to recognise this potential and support the work of our institutions. The importance of heritage is also highlighted in our blog on [the role of heritage in storytelling](#).

IFLA has also led in the preparation of a [letter](#) to the Director General of the World Intellectual Property Organization calling for action to ensure copyright laws and practices are supportive. This underlines the challenges created by the combination of the current situation and the risk that current laws create rigidities that make responding harder. In the case of libraries, this is the case when non-digital uses are permitted but digital ones are not, for example.

We have also produced a first blog looking at [overall trends that may result from the pandemic](#), from a variety of policy perspectives, and will follow up with a part 2 identifying specific potential advocacy points.

IFLA's Activities

IFLA's work to strengthen and unite the global library field continues, not just in spite of the COVID-19 Pandemic, but because of it. We are determined to maintain the momentum created by the Global Vision process and the launch of our Strategy last year, and believe strongly that the mission it sets out is as relevant now as it has ever been.

As set out in our [FAQs about IFLA and the COVID-19 pandemic](#), we have already worked hard to ensure that our volunteers and staff can continue their crucial work, and have seen a series of successful mid-term meetings by our Professional Units organised over the past weeks.

On this document, we have tried to bring together examples from around the world of how libraries are not just reacting, but innovating in the face of the challenges they face. We are already starting to build on these to prepare articles and posts about how different parts of the library field are responding, starting with a piece on [health librarians](#) for World Health Day. As underlined in the previous section, we are also focused on advocating for both the short and longer-term changes libraries need.

However, this is just the beginning. We are also looking forward to announcing exciting new services and opportunities to build a stronger field powering literate, informed and participatory societies into the future. In this, we will be working closely with our Professional Units – the biggest brains trust in the global library field – in order to help inspire, engage, enable and connect the global library field. We look forward to sharing more