

Italian libraries and coronavirus

Original

Italian libraries and coronavirus / Morriello, Rossana. - In: AGAINST THE GRAIN. - ISSN 1043-2094. - ELETTRONICO. - (2020).

Availability:

This version is available at: 11583/2823639 since: 2022-06-08T09:46:50Z

Publisher:

Published

DOI:

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The Rumors Blog – Italian libraries and coronavirus

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March 30, 2020



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By guest blogger: **Rossana Morriello** (research support librarian, Politecnico di Torino, Italy)

We were running in a Ferrari and suddenly we had to slow down and then stop. This is the sensation we had, especially at the beginning of the Covid-19 emergency as well as the impression of living in a sci-fi movie now that roads are empty and cities silent as never before. After a month from the first of the many special and urgent laws that the Italian government issued to contain the disease outbreak, we are trying to make the best from a bad situation. So are libraries and librarians.

Not all libraries closed at the beginning of the emergency. The lockdown was progressive. As the number of cases of persons infected by coronavirus unfortunately grew, the Italian government responded with new laws that progressively closed schools and universities, cultural events, cultural institutions, then shops (only pharmacies, supermarkets, food shops, and a few other essential shops can open). And now, people can go out only for work or serious reasons, otherwise they must stay at home.

Many librarians still work inside the libraries – now all closed to the public — but most work from home in a smart working environment or, if the institution was not equipped for that, they had to take their summer holidays and stay at home. Many people working in libraries with temporary jobs or as freelancers do not get an income anymore. This is actually a problem for many persons working in the cultural sector in general, not only in libraries.

Nevertheless, it took a short time for librarians to adapt to this previously unknown situation. They soon started to organize their jobs in a different way and exchange their experiences and suggestions both in the mailing list of Italian librarians **AIB-CUR** and in social networks, particularly the Facebook group of Italian libraries and librarians **“Biblioteche e bibliotecari italiani”**. In many cases, librarians keep on doing ordinary activities like digital reference, quality control of the catalog, loans and bringing books to patrons' home, materials selection for acquisitions, looking forward to the time when they will be able to do them. Acquisitions are quite difficult now since besides libraries, most of booksellers and vendors shut down too and the situation is hard. As for booksellers, there is an estimated loss in revenues of 47 billion euros in the month from 23 February to 25 March, as calculated by the **national association of publishers** and the **national association of traders**. They also estimated that 18,600 titles will not be published in 2020 in Italy, because of the coronavirus outbreak.

However, what is **not closed at all, is the digital world. Almost all cultural sectors started to open their collections and online services for free to the public. Museums, theaters, cinemas, and many digital platforms of any kind are offering online services freely.** Many publishers did too. Many scientific and scholarly publishers are collecting resources on Covid-19 and **offering free open access hubs** to help science internationally to find a cure for this terrible disease. Some publishers also opened their contents with textbooks to help students in schools and universities, who are all continuing their education in distant learning mode. Other publishers offered free access to their entertainment collections, literature, fiction, essays.

Many libraries and librarians took the opportunity to promote their digital services, which are often not known by the public, in academic, public and other kinds of libraries. As a result, many newspapers wrote about the availability of thousands of digital books and journals that one could read from home through the library. This was a chance to publicize library service, despite occurring in such an awful situation. The number of users of library services has therefore increased in these days, even new users, because **many libraries opened their digital collections also to users without a library card**. The Ministry of Culture leads this range of activities with the motto **“culture doesn’t stop” (la cultura non si ferma)** and the hashtag **“I read at home” (#ioleggoacasa)** as an extension of the general hashtag **“I stay at home” (#iorestoacasa)**. Moreover, librarians have been creating and sharing many new digital activities. They collected quality certified resources for the Covid-19 on their website (mainly academic libraries), which is particularly helpful to counteract fake news that has been circulating. Other activities involve librarians in making videos in which they, or even actors or novelists, recommend and read books, especially books for children. Other videos show library collections to the public, particularly ancient and manuscript collections, or even the back office work of librarians. Librarians then shared all digital resources they created in social media like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, proving how useful these media can be sometimes. Certainly, the isolation required by this pandemic emergency would have been much different, and probably more difficult to face, without social media. However, this emergency also reminded us of problems still existing, like the digital divide, which exclude many people from access to technology and digital resources.

What the coronavirus pandemic spread as shown us is the bright and dark side of life in a digital world, possibly a future way of life. It showed us some points to consider about how important open access to resources is, both for the advancement of science and for the spreading of culture. And of course what an important role libraries can have.

We still do not know how much the epidemic emergency will last and how it will change our lives. In addition, we do not know what kind of economic consequences we will have, since many experts are already talking about a probable recession. We can just hope that it will not last much longer, that consequences will be not so heavy, and that we can move to a better world at the end of the tunnel.

Stay well and safe!

About the author–

Rossana Morriello is a research support librarian at Politecnico di Torino, Italy. She is originally from Torino but she lived for many years in Venice and worked at Università Ca’ Foscari as a digital resources librarian. Her research interests focus on research assessment, digital scholarship, library collection development, library automation and digital libraries. Besides her many publications in these scientific fields, for a long time she has been exploring “literary librarianship” and she just published the book *La biblioteca narrata*, about the image and role of libraries and librarians in literature and cinema.

She received a master's degree in English and French literature from the University of Torino and a second master's degree in Library and Information Science from the University of Venice Ca' Foscari.

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2 Comments

1.



Anthony Paganelli on 2020-04-10 at 2:55 pm

Hello Rossana,

I want to thank you for submitting your blog. We all have been praying and thinking about all those affected by the virus in Italy and the world. The information you have provided is great in understanding how libraries have adapted to these unusual circumstances of mass closures. I hope that you keep us informed on how you and the Italian Libraries transition out of this pandemic, such as financially, resources, and services. Take care and best wishes to you and your loved ones.

[Reply](#)



[Rossana Morriello](#) on 2020-04-15 at 10:39 am

Hello Anthony,

thank you very much for your appreciation and for your kind words about Italy. I also very much liked your post and the great connection to mine with the analogy of the Corvette produced in you city. I will try to keep you informed for what I can. Best wishes to you and your loved ones too.

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