"They'll still come, they still need you, right?" Library Value after COVID-19

Amy McLay Paterson
Thompson Rivers University, Canada

Nicole Eva
University of Lethbridge, Canada

Introduction

We'll start with an assumption: if you're reading this, you likely believe that libraries have value—to their immediate communities, certainly, and likely to a broader swath of humanity at large. And year after year we measure and report on that value largely through quantitative usage metrics linked to the physical building—gate count, circulation stats, space usage, group instruction, etc. After all, libraries are just *places*, right? On the worst days, reduced to places to store and retrieve physical books and other media; on better days, places to provide computer and Internet access, places to study, gather, and find community. At our best, libraries are often framed as places of refuge, opportunity, and peace, so what does it mean when the buildings are no longer accessible to the public?

Library workers know all too well that regular usage stats dropping to zero during the COVID-19 pandemic did not represent a drop in overall library value. Yet workers often overly associate themselves with the physical building, even to the detriment of their own wellbeing (Ettarh, 2018). The closure of library buildings due to COVID-19 represented an ideal opportunity for librarians to evaluate and question the meaning of their work and particularly how we frame, communicate, and reward value in both libraries and librarian work.

This study sought to explore the work experiences of Canadian academic librarians during the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the semi-structured interviews, almost all study participants shared thoughts on how libraries should change as a result of COVID and how their work was valued (or not) by their patrons, colleagues and administration. While other themes were explored by the authors in previous articles (see McLay Paterson & Eva, 2022a & 2022b), this paper explores the idea of *value* as it pertained to librarians working during the pandemic.

Literature Review

Seale and Mirza (2020) contend that,

> ...the core question—what is value?—feels even more important as we see undervalued and underpaid service and maintenance workers suddenly becoming "essential" but remaining underpaid and under-protected. Academic librarianship, as we have seen in our privilege to work from home, can and does turn to weak but still present notions of professionalism and prestige, which seek to devalue and hide the centrality of care work to the profession (11).

Many LIS scholars have pointed out that academic libraries are far from immune to the prevailing societal trend of neoliberalism and the associated devaluation of immaterial labour (Seale & Mirza, 2020; Pagowsky, 2021; Popowich, 2019; Nicholson, 2019). Along with these circumstances, comes an ever-present state of crisis (Almeida, 2020; Meyers et al., 2021; Seale & Mirza, 2020; Nicholson, Pagowsky & Seale, 2019) and an over-reliance on technological innovation (Levesque, 2020; Popowich, 2019). Libraries, while not new to the use of technology in offering their resources and services, were thrust into a space in which the physical presence held so sacred to many (Ettarh, 2018) was no longer an option.

Luckily, it is the library workers, not the library building, that provides care for users. Sloniowski (2016) calls for the care inherent in library work to be more explicitly recognized, while Arellano Douglas (2020) contends that the reason that the emotional labour in librarianship is purposely unrecognized because "librarians have sought to distance themselves from the idea that library work is care work, service work, and feminized work" (p. 54). Many other studies have reiterated that the immaterial, reproductive labour that librarians engage in is routinely erased and devalued (Nicholson, 2021; Revitt, 2020; Allison-Cassin, 2020; Seale & Mirza, 2020). For example, Nicholson (2019) unpacks how thoughtful care work in academic libraries is subordinated to just-in-time services, resulting in expanding, unmanageable workloads.

The permanent state of crisis in libraries calls upon librarians to constantly police the value of their own work (Almeida, 2020), which perpetuates the quantitative metrics that mislead both the public and ourselves about where library value truly lies. This anxiety can be seen in the library preoccupation with image maintenance (see Hicks, 2016): for example, Santamaria's (2020) discussion of economies of awe to craft a fantastical image for the purpose of obscuring the centrality of whiteness in library belonging. O'Neill and Kelley's (2021) study of crisis communication in academic libraries uncovered significant "hesitancy or reluctance to communicate bad news, especially for those crises that may present a more significant negative impact on a library's reputation" (p. 321).

Methodology

The following description of our methodology has been taken from an article in-press (McLay Paterson & Eva, 2022a) with slight edits. As our goal was to explore in-depth individual experiences, we determined that semi-structured interviews would be the best method of capturing our participants' thoughts, feelings and understandings of their work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Approval for the study was granted by the University of Lethbridge Human Participant Research Committee on January 18, 2021 and by the Thompson Rivers University Research Ethics Board on February 9, 2021.

In order to work toward a cohesive picture of academic librarian work, we limited our scope to those working in non-administrative librarian positions at Canadian post-secondary institutions. While the observations of other library workers, such as library technicians or assistants, would undoubtedly be interesting and noteworthy, it was determined that their work and experiences would be distinct from that of librarians, in part because of the additional struggles faced by this group of workers—often facing greater job insecurity or having to work on-site while librarians continued to work from home. Librarians in administrative positions were also excluded, as we expected—correctly, as it turned out—that relationships with library administration would loom large in many of our participants' responses.

In an effort to recruit a representational cross-section of librarians from Canadian universities, a recruitment email was sent to the following listservs: Canadian Association of Academic Librarians (CAPAL), Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) Librarians, and Jerome (Alberta Library Association). The researchers also sought participation via Twitter, where both authors are connected to a large network of Canadian academic librarians. The major departure in our approach from the ethnographic tradition is that we acknowledge ourselves as fully entrenched participants in both the culture of academic librarianship and the phenomena of its changes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Like Strega and Brown (2015), "we reject not only the possibility of objectivity, but also its usefulness" (p. 9); instead, we ground ourselves in deep knowledge of and commitment to our academic library community. Our research strategy was likely inherently attractive to those librarians who wanted to tell their story, as there were no participation incentives offered other than the prospect of a conversation. Some participants explicitly mentioned the unique aspects of their own experience that motivated them to share their story, while others mentioned that they connected with the expressed motivations of our research.

Interviews were split as evenly as possible among three co-investigators and were assigned based both on our availability and to keep the workload distribution even. Because of the potentially sensitive nature of the questions, opportunities for refusal and withdrawal from the study were clearly outlined both in the signed consent form and verbally by the investigators at both the start and the end of interviews. Interviews

were conducted via web meeting using Microsoft Teams software in March and April 2021, generally lasting between 30 and 60 minutes; they were recorded, then transcribed by the co-investigators. Transcripts were then reviewed both for accuracy and assurance of anonymity. Participants were given the option on their initial consent form to review the transcript at this stage and to redact any potentially identifying information.

The three co-investigators collaborated on determining an inductive coding process for thematic analysis of the anonymized transcripts. A sample transcript was chosen and coded independently by each of the three co-investigators. These initial codes were discussed and collated to create a preliminary coding structure with identified themes and subthemes. The preliminary structure was tested, as each co-investigator then coded a third of the interviews with the help of Nvivo software. Codes were added, combined or removed in this process through discussion, identification of examples, and mutual agreement. Themes and subthemes were also refined. One of the co-investigators then recoded the entire dataset using this final structure; minor refinements were made during this process, discussed and mutually agreed-upon. At this point, one of the co-investigators was compelled to drop out of the project due to encroaching demands of life and work. The two remaining co-investigators forged on in further discussion and dissemination of the findings.

This paper will discuss themes that emerged related to library (and librarian) value. Privacy and confidentiality of our participants was taken very seriously. We have used pseudonyms where appropriate, minimizing additional details about the participants' lives and jobs to protect their anonymity.

Results and Discussion

Throughout our interviews, participants mused at various times about the value of both their own work as librarians and the value of libraries in a larger sense, often locating that value within invisible, unproductive labour. In fact, "the dissonance between work that participants saw as valued by their administration and work they felt was valuable to their communities was one of the strongest themes throughout the interviews (McLay Paterson, 2022)." This dissonance resulted in participants devoting large amounts of time to work considered outside their core job duties, and lead a number of participants to note the various ways that the pandemic changed expectations for library workers and shed light on the shifting user needs and expectations for library services. Finally, participants shared their thoughts on the larger value of libraries and how that value can best be harnessed going forward.

Valuable Work as Extra Work

Study participants were frequently adamant that some of the most important aspects of their duties during the COVID-19 pandemic were not considered central to their core

job duties or were taken on top of everything else. The most common form of this scope creep noted by participants was service roles and committee work taking on a much larger percentage of participants' time. Melanie said, "Service is supposed to take up 20% of my time, and I think it often takes up a lot more." Twenty percent is a very common service percentage in Canadian universities, but Melanie was far from alone in noting that her service component had grown beyond manageable levels.

Other librarians in our study took on additional duties within their functional or liaison roles, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic—duties that were necessary for communication but were still on top of their regular roles. One of the Health Sciences Librarians in our study talked about taking on an additional role communicating information to hospital staff:

> Questions were identified by the doctors or the residents…and then the librarians went and found the material to help people answer the questions. So, it's like…it's actually not part of my duties….I'm not supposed to be doing this work for people. I'm supposed to be teaching it to new people, but you can't tell a resident, "Hey, during a pandemic, let me teach you how to search, and then you can just…" That's not how that relationship works, right? So that's technically outside of the scope of my responsibilities, but I did it, we all did it anyways…and I would say ate up two or three days of my week every week.

While Health Sciences Librarians were not the only librarians to take on additional duties, as we have discussed in another paper, they were the only group in our study to universally report a workload increase (McLay Paterson and Eva, 2022a).

Finally, a number of participants talked about duties that had previously been small parts of their jobs growing during the pandemic. These librarians talked about how the work grew because it was valuable and needed, but many worried that it was not considered valuable to their administrations. Elena was one of the librarians in this situation. She said:

> Because if they don't really recognize the value of this kind of work…then how does that reflect on you as a librarian and your career progression. So we have to do it as a part of our job and it's expected of us, but it just means we have to let other things go, that we might want for our own kind of personal development or professional development.

Change in Perspective

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a change in perspective to many, academic librarians included. Many were reflective about what they saw as needing to change in librarianship, including both the work itself and the expectations for that work. Some

participants commented on the fact that normal assessments of work done during COVID could not happen in a way that they normally would. As Jana said,

> When I think back to normal I also think of... expectations being adjusted for the way that we are, like, evaluated or asked to do things. I do feel like in the last year or so a lot of people, a lot of managers, have been pretty good about being like, shit is wild, like, I know that you can't do as much as you could before, and that's fine.

Jana, like most other study participants did not want to see a return of the old normal, and for many participants, the unwillingness to return to the old ways was less because of changes wrought during the pandemic than the light it shed on the ways our practice was already broken. After all, if we are prepared to defend library value in 2020 with 0 gate count, 0 print circulation, fewer classes taught, fewer workshops offered and attended, and many other of our regular metrics dropping in kind, we cannot be content to say that 2020 was a blip. We cannot just say that these metrics did not represent library value *that year* without also absorbing the fact that they never actually did. It is clear that the way that we offer and assess library services will need to undergo some scrutiny as we return. Krista readily offered some examples:

> Normally we keep our building open with staff—this is the old normal—from [early] until [late]. So that we can...lend books, which people don't use, like let's be clear—compared to what they did....They use our collections, they just use them digitally. We've been buying e-preferred for years, and we still structure our hours around print circulation. I'm like, "what are these books that those people are finding on the shelves at this point, like? What do they say...I can't even."

Other participants questioned the decision-making that went into creating low-value work for librarians with little evidence. In some cases, librarians were physically brought back into the building to answer reference questions, when it was clear that there was no need for in-person reference, simply study space. From a different perspective, the Outreach Librarians in our study, found themselves questioning the value of trying to transition their in-person activities to a virtual environment. One Outreach Librarian told us,

> I think it's just right now, like I said with everything being online, we're just one more space competing with a myriad of other different things and...not everything can really kind of translate into an online experience in the same way. And you can try, you can try digital escape games and you can try this and that, and it's just...not getting the same... and it takes a lot of time to do that as well....I'm a librarian, I'm not a Game Master, as much as I'd like to think I am, I'm not. You know, so now you're asking

> me to learn another type of skill or whatever and that's going to take up time but nothing else is...ever dropped off.

Outreach Librarians were not alone in our study in feeling like they were under pressure to *prove* value, particularly during times of budget cuts, more than to do meaningful work for their communities. This lead to the reluctance to say no, even when feeling overworked. As Leanne said,

> I do feel like there's... just this feeling of like, needing to prove my value in this context that where there's funding cuts, and also prove my value because the work is not as visible, right. We could get into this being a capitalist trap right, where it's like this need to produce and produce, and I think it's so much easier to get into that headspace when you are working alone and isolated in your home... and not with colleagues around.

While many found themselves frustrated at the difficulty of doing meaningful work that was also valued by their administrations, many were optimistic about the future of both librarian and library value. As Jana said:

> I know that everyone has gone through a lot of things and it's been really difficult, but from a service delivery perspective... what the library has been able to achieve, I think has been amazing. We've still been able to, like, serve our community, we've still been able to do all of the work that we were doing before: all of that kind of services, all the programming, still maintaining those same relationships, which has been great. And so, I want that to be used as evidence that we should have more flexibility for, you know, what we expect from people or how they do that work.

Library Value beyond COVID

Several of our participants expressed thoughts that libraries will be more important than ever during and after COVID, not only because of the aforementioned ability to "pivot" from physical to digital services but because of the role that libraries and librarians can play in addressing inequality. Public libraries are often praised for their status as a third place–open to the public, providing free access to space, companionship, and myriad resources. Academic libraries should choose a future path that embraces those aspects of librarianship by welcoming community members and advocating for Open resources. As Jeannette said:

> As someone in a relatively privileged position, I can't help but reflect that a lot of what I feel may have been successful interactions, either in classrooms or with students, that there's probably tenfold of students who are just lost and are going to be the real victims of all of this. You know,

> the student who just has a phone or is sleeping in their car? Or all these things that we just don't know about....I know that there's so many people who were on the margins before Covid and have just been pushed, and that's the piece that really bothers me. I know that they are there, but I don't know. I can't see them to see that they are there and I think, you know, with an in-person library building...it's an opportunity for someone to come in and have access to all the technology and all the bells and whistles and still be able to connect with someone, and we can't lose sight of that. We have to remember that.

Others, like Andrew, found themselves advocating for their library colleagues who were still required to work in public-facing positions:

> But there's also advocacy for, for the people who are in the library and have been in there, right? There's certain people in there with a mask every day, right? Wondering if the person standing across from them is sick or not. And they didn't get a pay raise, they're not getting danger pay, they're not even at the front of the queue to get vaccines. They're not considered an essential worker, right? So if you're not considered an essential worker, what are you doing working? So I, you know, it's an opportunity to advocate...for people who have less power, temporary positions, lower rank, less power in the library, and who may not have the language, the experience, or the relationships to be able to challenge how administration does things.

Over and over, participants located library value in the care they as library workers were able to provide from their colleagues and for their communities. This care is embedded into librarianship, but is not measurable or quantifiable. Accepting that care is not quantifiable means recognizing and valuing the ongoing, hard work of building trust and relationships. As Maria said:

> Really, it's just been trying to keep our foot in the door and reminding the professors that we're there. Because I'm seeing that once I'm able to have a really good impression with students through instruction, all of a sudden I'll recognize their names come through on an email list. So that was a huge concern for me: making sure that the students are supported, 'cause that's who are. They still come. They still are coming, too. They'll still come, they still need you, right?

Conclusion

As we move into the post-pandemic era, academic libraries have many choices yet to make about how they recognize and communicate that value to their campus communities and beyond. While libraries were justly proud of their ability to pivot to

virtual delivery in the unprecedented pandemic times of 2020, will we be able to build and maintain a new normal moving into the future, distracted by the comforting allure of the myriad ways we've always done it?

It is uncertain how patterns of use will change now that libraries are mostly reopened and the urgency and heightened awareness of the pandemic are starting to fade. We don't yet know if print circulation numbers will bounce back to pre-COVID levels or if campus desktops and laptops will still be in demand, as they were before the virtual delivery era. Far more important than agonizing over whether or not old value metrics will recover will be learning to embrace and invest in the ways our community already value the services and knowledge provided by librarians.

References

Allison-Cassin, S. (2020). Bodies, brains, and machines: An exploration of the relationship between the material and affective states of librarians and information systems. *Library Trends, 68*(3), 409–430. https://doi:10.1353/lib.2020.0009.

Almeida, N. (2020). The labour of austerity: Absurdity, performative resistance, and cultural transformation. *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship, 6*, 1–25. https://doi.org/10.33137/cjal-rcbu.v6.34008.

Arellano Douglas, V. (2020). Moving from critical assessment to assessment as care. *Communications in Information Literacy, 14*(1), 46–65. https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2020.14.1.4.

Emmelhainz, C., Pappas, E. & Seale, M. (2017). Behavioral expectations for the Mommy librarian: The successful reference transaction as emotional labor. In M. Accardi (Ed.), *The feminist reference desk: Concepts, critiques, and conversations* (pp. 27–45). Library Juice Press.

Ettarh, F. (2018). Vocational awe and librarianship: the lies we tell ourselves. *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*. http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/.

Hicks, D. (2016). Advocating for librarianship: The discourses of advocacy and service in the professional identities of librarians. *Library Trends 64*(3), 615–640. https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2016.0007.

Julien, H., & Genuis, S. K. (2009). Emotional labour in librarians' instructional work. *Journal of Documentation, 65*(6), 926–937. https://doi.org/10.1108/00220410910998924.

Levesque, L. (2020). Material entanglement and technology fetishism in academic libraries. *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship, 6*, 1–24. https://doi.org/10.33137/cjal-rcbu.v6.34345.

McLay Paterson, A. (2022). "Just the way we've always done it": Who shapes the new normal for academic libraries? *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship, 8*. (forthcoming).

McLay Paterson, A., & Eva, N. (2022). "Always at work": Canadian academic librarian work during COVID-19. *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research, 17*(2). https://doi:10.21083/partnership.v17i2.6783 (forthcoming).

McLay Paterson, A., & Eva, N. (2022). "Relationships of care": Care and meaning in Canadian academic librarian work during COVID-19. *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research, 17*(2). https://doi.10.21083/partnership.v17i2.7055 (forthcoming).

Meyers, N., Martinez-Montavon, A. M., Narlock, M., & Stathers, K. (2021). A genealogy of refusal: Walking away from crisis and scarcity narratives. *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship, 7,* 1–18. https://doi.org/10.33137/cjalrcbu.v7.36442.

Nicholson, K. P., Pagowsky, N., & Seale, M. (2019). Just-in-time or Just-in-case? Time, learning analytics, and the library. *Library Trends, 68*(1), 54–71. https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2019.0030.

Nicholson, K. (2019). "Being in time": New public management, academic librarians, and the temporal labor of pink-collar public service work. *Library Trends, 68*(2), 130–152. https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2019.0034.

Nicholson, K. P. (2021). Spatial thinking, gender and immaterial affective labour in the post-Fordist academic library. *Journal of Documentation, 78*(1). 96–112. https://doi.org/10.1108/JD-11-2020-0194.

O'Neill, B., & Kelley, R. (2021). Delivering bad news: Crisis communication methods in academic libraries. *College & Research Libraries, 82*(3), 310–331. https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.82.3.310.

Oldenburg, R. (1989). *The great good place.* St Paul, Minnesota. Paragon House.

Pagosky, N. (2021). The contested one-shot: Deconstructing power structures to imagine new futures. *College & Research Libraries, 82*(3), 300–309. https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.82.3.300.

Popowich, S. (2019). “The power of knowledge, objectified”: Immaterial labor, cognitive capitalism, and academic librarianship. *Library Trends, 68*(2), 153–173. https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2019.0035.

Revitt, E. J. (2020). *The academic librarian as the subaltern: An institutional ethnography of a feminized profession* [PhD thesis, University of Alberta]. ERA: Education and Research Archive. https://era.library.ualberta.ca/items/f21384a8-eb5e-45eb-9742-6823a9a72f52.

Santamaria, M. R. (2020). Concealing white supremacy through fantasies of the library: Economies of affect at work. *Library Trends, 68*(3), 431–449. https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2020.0000.

Seale, M. & Mirza, R. (2020). The coin of love and virtue: Academic libraries and value in a global pandemic. *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship, 6,* 1–30. https://doi.org/10.33137/cjal-rcbu.v6.34457.

Sloniowski, L. (2016). Affective labor, resistance, and the academic librarian. *Library Trends, 64*(4), 645–666. https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2016.0013.

Strega, S. & Brown, L. (2015). From resistance to resurgence. In S. Strega and L. Brown (Eds.), *Research as resistance: Revisiting critical, Indigenous, and anti-oppressive approaches* (2nd ed.) (pp. 1–16). Canadian Scholars Press.