

# Leaders' Conversations: Public Libraries in the Post-COVID-19 World



On 29 September 2020, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) Regional Office for Asia and Oceania and the National Library Board, Singapore jointly presented the second episode of the Leaders' Conversations series, which focused on public libraries in the post-COVID-19 world. This inaugural series seeks to provide a platform for leaders in the region and beyond to share their insights into major challenges and developments in the library world. The series has received great support from IFLA and is aligned to the IFLA Global Vision.

## Address by Ms Christine Mackenzie, President, IFLA

The session for the public libraries was opened by Ms Christine Mackenzie, President of IFLA who began by stating that the pandemic presented challenges and opportunities for IFLA. It was rethinking its platforms and processes and there was urgency to be more innovative about IFLA's interactions with the units and volunteers in the library field.

IFLA started the Global Vision project four years ago in order to better equip the organisation in an increasingly globalised world. The biggest and most comprehensive survey about the state of libraries was undertaken and contributions were received from library workers all over the world. The results highlighted access to information and knowledge as an important and common goal.

Regardless of any pandemic situation, Ms Mackenzie emphasised that one of the most important roles for libraries was to advocate for the United Nations Agenda 2030 to create a sustainable and fairer world. IFLA had pressed for the access to information, universal literacy, access to ICT and cultural heritage to be included in the UN goals. The efforts of libraries around the world showing how they were helping to achieve the UN targets were highlighted in IFLA's website.

Ms Mackenzie stressed that libraries needed to think strategically about partnerships and work together with other libraries, with the different types of libraries and between library

associations. In addition, libraries should forge partnerships with like-minded organisations that have the same goals and values. She hoped that the Leaders' Conversations would lead to more collaboration opportunities and strengthening of ties. She expected common themes to surface in the session, which would indicate that everyone was united in common views and goals.

### **Presentation by Ms Kate Torney, Chief Executive Officer, State Library of Victoria (SLV)**

Ms Kate Torney shared that SLV adapted swiftly to the changes and the new technology had now become the norm. Even before the pandemic, SLV had made a collective investment in digitising its resources and was helping communities to thrive. The library closures demonstrated how critical library services were to the community.

Ms Torney recalled a lecture on disaster recovery by Professor Daniel Aldrich from Boston's North-eastern University. He had discovered that strong social capital and community connection was the common factor that helped with quicker recovery in these disaster-affected communities.

The library was well placed to understand who would be hit hardest in their community and well equipped to provide aid. Libraries had already been tackling issues such as assistance with employment searches and setting up businesses, social isolation, bridging the digital divide and more. SLV moved quickly to bring library services to the homes of their users and managed to even reach patrons who had never visited the library. This was done through promoting e-books and resources, online storytelling, online talks and bibliotherapy.

By keeping the community connected, supported and engaged, the library signalled that the community was at the core, and recovery could then begin from the grassroots. These values were reflected in the Libraries Change Lives campaign, a state-wide initiative launched by Public Libraries Victoria and SLV. The goal was to communicate the importance of celebrating libraries and appeal to those who considered the library an important part of their lives to provide active support.

Besides building social capital with the surrounding community, the library staff worked on building their own social capital within the organisation. The ability to pivot to the digital platform ensured that staff kept in touch and helped one another. The response to their work helped them to appreciate the value of caring for those around them, and their position in the library gave them the tools and purpose to do so.

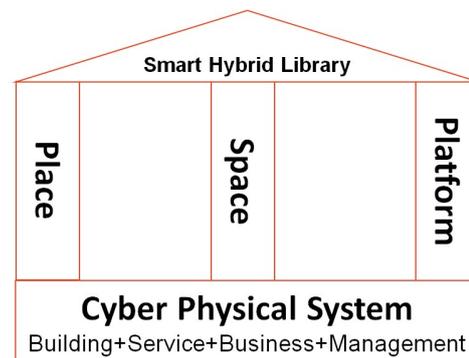
### **Presentation by Mr Chen Chao, Director, Shanghai Library (SL)**

Mr Chen Chao revealed three key insights gleaned by SL from the pandemic experience. First, there was a need to strengthen the continuous innovation of digital services. Almost all libraries had basic online capabilities in cyberspace. However, SL realised that its current digital service matrix lacked strategic coordination, and neither the service content nor the promotion method had the core capability of iterative and continuous innovation.

Second, SL realised that while it had a foundation of knowledge services, it needed to cultivate a core competence in knowledge services and a mature knowledge service paradigm. Mr Chen Chao elaborated on how SL took advantage of its information research expertise to write articles, support decision makers and counter an information epidemic of rumours and lies.

Third, while libraries had begun to explore smart services, it was necessary to consolidate the goal of transforming to Smart Hybrid Libraries (SHL). In the process of gradual reopening, SL quickly developed an online reservation system and explored the method of admission control using reader cards and Health Codes but could not achieve optimal results in this reservation management. SL realised that the experiments with mobile and intelligent services that it had carried out in recent years were inadequate. At present, the construction of a Smart Hybrid Library was their next goal. The realisation of smart services in physical space and cyberspace should be the core feature of SHL. A Cyber Physical System (CPS) would become the key technology behind a SHL.

In the post-epidemic era, SL planned to take the opportunity to fully implement their 3i (intelligence, inclusiveness, interconnection) transformation strategy. In actively building a SHL that focuses on both online and onsite services, as well as integrating research and services, Mr Chen Chao hoped to redefine SL for the future.



### **Presentation by Ms Luthfiati Makarim, Member, Indonesian Library Association (ILA)**

Ms Luthfati Makarim provided a background on Indonesia's COVID-19 experience and the ILA's strategic plans for the post-pandemic situation. While it was important that the libraries were able to continue to provide services, the health and safety of librarians and users were a top priority too. As library services were increasingly sought after by the public during the pandemic, the principle in the disruption era was to turn the challenges faced into opportunities. The importance of the role of the librarian had grown.

The strategic plans for the post pandemic scenario centred on the following:

- a. Responding quickly to provide better and suitable services based on analysis of public information needs and demands.
- b. Continuously improving and innovating on knowledge sharing and information dissemination initiatives.
- c. Optimization of communication and information technology.

To implement these strategies, ILA was working on improving the agility of its operational, human resource, finance and media communication management. It was also important to value speed, accuracy, leadership, target setting, innovation and creativity.

Despite the COVID-19 outbreak, ILA was able to celebrate Indonesian Librarian Day and hold the 47<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration of ILA. Capacity building efforts for librarians via online workshops and webinars were sustained.

### **Presentation by Ms Valentina Kassisieh, Chief Executive Officer, Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation (AHSF)**

Ms Valentina Kassisieh introduced the AHSF as not just a library, but an organisation that provides many different activities. The Abdul Hameed Shoman Public Library (AHSFL) was established in 1986 and the Knowledge Path Children & Youths Library was launched in 2013. With COVID-19, AHSFL drove its efforts into going digital and making knowledge accessible to through the following:

- a. Establishing an online platform for e-books and audio books.
- b. Providing free subscriptions to an Arabic reading platform.
- c. Extending the lending time online.
- d. Providing temporary free memberships that allow access to databases and e-library.
- e. Supporting researchers and students by sending them articles and studies on subjects that are of interest to them.
- f. Storytelling for children shifted to online readings using minimal resources.
- g. Library teams were able to perform and deliver services such as customer service, updating of databases, book lending etc. to patrons online.

AHSFL marketing campaigns now focused on promoting digital resources and creating a human-centric approach to introduce the library. A lot of resources and effort went into building awareness of their E-Library as the children were not familiar with ebooks and audiobooks. The online engagement was successful as their patrons responded with messages of encouragement and appreciation on their social media sites.

In Jordan, the reopening of libraries was not a priority with the government's attention trained on economic sectors. In response, AHSFL took the following measures:

- a. Lobbied for government understanding of the importance of libraries.
- b. Advocated over all media channels for the necessity of reopening libraries.
- c. Influenced public opinion to call for libraries to reopen.
- d. Established and shared formal reopening guidelines with the government.

Eventually, AHSFL was granted approval to reopen. Upon reopening, AHSFL adapted to a hybrid model of programmes, which meant that the sessions were screened online, and only a limited capacity of patrons could attend the session onsite. Online parenting courses were introduced. Other programmes included online storytelling, online book launches, online poetry reading and hybrid book discussions.

In order to build resilience and relevance of the libraries, AHSFL worked on the following areas:

- a. Responding to COVID-19 updates and hot-spots.
- b. Perfecting a hybrid model for delivering programmes and services.

- c. Ensuring continuous book delivery.
- d. Signing agreements with publishers and hosting authors to ensure copyright issues were observed.
- e. Work with TV companies to broadcast library activities on their online platforms and TV stations.
- f. Increasing their digital resources and online services.
- g. Offering online tutoring for children and workshops for students, youth and parents.
- h. Hosting officials to discuss health and economy boosting measures.
- i. Running online competitions to encourage reading.

Ms Kassisieh strongly advocated for the importance and relevance of libraries especially during a crisis. It was a resource for free and reliable information with the expertise of the librarians on hand. Human interaction was an important part of the national and regional culture, and individuals were constantly engaged with the community. She shared one of their taglines - 'You are never alone when there's a library close to you!', and that this was particularly relevant during these difficult times.



**Presentation by Mr Michael A. Pinto, Immediate Past President, Philippines Librarians Association, Inc (PLAI)**

An online survey conducted by the PLAI on the status of Public Libraries during the pandemic had revealed that for libraries that were partially open, online services grew to be the most important service that was offered to the public, aside from reference and circulation services. Many library staff were also redeployed as volunteers and front liners to assist with the relief efforts, which included:

- a. Repacking relief goods (food and cash assistance).
- b. Distributing relief goods to the community and front liners.
- c. Assisting at COVID-19 facilities.
- d. Validators for the Social Amelioration Program.
- e. Issuing travel passes.

For librarians who continued to provide library services, they focused their efforts on:

- a. Collection inventory
- b. Technical processing of library materials
- c. Online document delivery
- d. Research about COVID-19
- e. Reference service
- f. Online tutorials and storytelling

Libraries faced the challenges of a lack of funding and resources, slow internet connection, lack of technical knowledge among library staff and a rise in COVID-19 cases. Mr Pinto opined that the public libraries would have to address various needs in order to provide satisfactory digital library services. Firstly, the need to build the infrastructure and facilities required to

support such a system. Secondly, the need to retool their manpower and train them to be digital service providers. Next, they required better internet connectivity. In some parts of the Philippines, internet connection was still poor. Lastly, they needed a plan to maintain the sustainability of the system. As most libraries relied mainly on print materials and not digital, the presence of physical libraries in the Philippines was still very important.

Unfortunately, the local governments did not regard the library as a high priority. In order to secure funding and reiterate their relevance to the stakeholders, the public libraries needed to ensure that their services were recognised by their political leaders and have them realise the value of libraries to the community. They would have to introduce more innovative and creative services and connect strongly with the community.



Services had also been provided to communities at risk. The Library Virtual Reference Assistance (L-ViRA) provides a virtual reference service where patrons can message the library and ask for assistance. The Hatid Pag-Asa sa Pagbabasa (Giving Hope Through Reading) Project provided reading material to COVID-19 patients so that they can continue to learn while recuperating in the hospital. Book donations had been made to

schools to use as additional references as many schools adapted to home-based learning. There were also online storytelling sessions using Facebook Live and a platform in which patrons could apply for online government services.

### **Presentation by Mr Ng Cher Pong, Chief Executive Officer, National Library Board, Singapore (NLB)**

Mr Ng Cher Pong identified two considerations which NLB had when preparing for the future. The first was how the libraries should respond to national challenges and identify areas where we could provide meaningful contributions. The second was how our services could adjust to the changes in patrons' expectations and behaviours.

He also touched on the Libraries and Archives Plan 2021-2025, which was NLB's strategic plan for the next five years and elaborated on the four "beyonds" for libraries. The first was to move beyond reading to facilitate learning as one pursues lifelong learning and prepares for newly created jobs in these times of transformation and disruption. The second was to move beyond books to curating programmes and supporting different modes in which reading and learning take place. The third was to move beyond collecting experiences to engaging Singaporeans. NLB's "Documenting COVID-19 in Singapore" public call, for instance, engages members of the public to collect and preserve their memories together. Finally, to move beyond physical to omni-channel modalities by integrating NLB's digital offerings seamlessly with its physical collections and programmes.



In addition, NLB was also thinking about its evolving role in the community in four areas:

- a. Learning marketplace – running an omni-channel learning marketplace with NLB-owned and partner-owned content;
- b. Empowered citizenry – empowering citizen participation through deeds and dialogue;
- c. Equaliser – bridging the inequality gap by levelling up skills and through providing content and tools or assets; and
- d. Informed citizenry – equipping citizens with the techniques to discern truths from untruths and pointing them to where they can find authoritative sources of information amid the “infodemic” brought by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Question and Answer**

### ***How did SL get to these smart strategies and concepts for the Cyber Physical System (CPS)? – Mr Afnan Saleem Al-Awamleh, Projects Development Specialist, Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation***

Mr Chen Chao said as SL was building a new library in the Pudong district, they used the opportunity to turn their smart strategy into a reality. The CPS was inspired by the main driving concepts of Industry 4.0, or the Fourth Industrial Revolution. This involved the usage of the Internet of Things, big data and more. For example, they had an AI robot that would greet their patrons and provide virtual reference services. They were also doing a lot of research & development to develop the next new generation of Library Services Platform. The CPS and SHL were not just about the concept, but also the technology. The core concept of the Smart Hybrid Library that SL was building would be about integrating physical space and cyber space.

### ***What is AHSF’s experience with hybrid programming? – Mr Gene Tan, Moderator***

Ms Valentina Kassisieh shared that as a result of hybrid programming, their reach had increased exponentially. For the patrons to feel like they were part of the event, they need to be engaged. This was especially so for children – when they saw other children at the programme, the level of interaction was higher, and they felt more engaged. In addition, with the physical presence of other children, they had a sense of ownership and a feeling of being part of a group.

However, having a hybrid model was not an easy feat as it required individuals to attend the programme on both the offline and online platforms, and library staff had to manage both platforms. Despite all these challenges, AHSF was reaching as many people as possible with their content, and thus this is a good outcome for them.

Mr Ng Cher Pong reflected on what Industry 4.0 means for libraries. Industry 4.0 was fascinating as it was the confluence of different technologies such as robotics and artificial intelligence. This was a period of experimentation when we would do different things – many would succeed, some might fail. The hope is that we could learn from each other, build on our services and increase our accessibility by leveraging these technologies.

***How did the management support their librarians when they stepped up to take on additional roles on the frontlines given that little was known during the early stages of the pandemic? Did they sense that their librarians were fearful? – Ms Catherine Lau, Assistant Chief Executive, National Library Board, Singapore***

Mr Michael A. Pinto replied that since the Philippines had always been in a disaster-prone zone, the locals were used to such situations. They knew what to do and how to step up when disasters strike. Additionally, the librarians were passionate and even in their regular line of work, they would brave the weather and difficult terrain to deliver their services. With their strong faith, they could bind strongly together and smile through the difficulties that they face.

Ms Luthfiati Makarim added that in Indonesia, the infrastructure for digital services might not be complete and not all librarians were well equipped with the necessary skills. Thus, they had been upskilling their librarians through webinar lessons. In terms of community service, the librarians had helped to raise money for donation to the COVID-19 relief cause.

***What is the current state of libraries in China? – Ms Valentina Kassisieh, Panellist***

Mr Chen Chao said that everything was nearly back to normal in Shanghai. All the libraries and schools were currently open. For SL, library users needed to make a reservation before they were allowed to enter the library, and they were required to provide the health code to ascertain their health status.

***Do you think that library services will shift to the digital realm due to COVID-19? – Ms Catherine Lau, Assistant Chief Executive, National Library Board, Singapore***

Ms Kate Torney opined that there would indeed be a shift and the number of people which SLV had been able to reach online during this period is amazing. Considering the extent of digital engagement and the people who might not have the capacity to visit libraries as they live hours away, SLV would be rethinking how they could deliver services in different ways. Currently, SLV adopted a digital-first approach for their engagement. This means that they would design and plan any forms of engagement from a digital perspective before incorporating the physical elements.

***Round-robin session: Questions inspired by a book on Netflix***

To conclude the Q&A segment, Mr Gene Tan raised a series of questions inspired by the book **No Rules. Netflix and the Culture of Reinvention** by the founder Reed Hastings. Within the organisation, they apply a concept called “start, stop and continue”. How would you apply that to libraries? What would you stop? What would you continue? And what would you start?



**Here's what our panellists had to say:**

**Stop** issuing physical membership cards – Ms Luthfiati Makarim

**Stop** the proliferation of meetings, including online meetings  
**Continue** adopting the physical-digital approach – Ms Kate Torney

**Stop** thinking negatively  
**Start** sharing more about their lives with the community – Mr Michael A. Pinto

We will never **stop**  
**Continue** digital library services – Mr Chen Chao

**Stop** providing audio-visual materials and move to streaming  
**Continue** the digital acceleration of library technology and services  
**Start** conversations with organisations and people that we would not have thought of before – Mr Ng Cher Pong

**Stop** the usage of complex library classification systems to make things easier for users  
**Start** using VR and AI to make books come alive – Ms Valentina Kassisieh

**Stop** thinking that everything can be shifted online as human interactions remain important and a hybrid model can be adopted  
**Continue** to think about our humanity  
**Start** being more innovative – Ms Christine Mackenzie

### **Closing remarks by Mr Ng Cher Pong, Chief Executive Officer, National Library Board, Singapore**

Mr Ng Cher Pong thanked IFLA and the participants for the strong support shown for the Leaders' Conversations. From the discussion, it was evident that there were many areas for the library community to learn from each other. Even though we are going through challenging times, we should be reminded that how we respond to a crisis is often what would define us. From the experiences shared by the panellists, Mr Ng felt that there was a lot for everyone in

the library world to be proud about, in terms of how we collectively responded to the pandemic.

**Panellists**

Ms Christine Mackenzie, President, IFLA

Ms Kate Torney, Chief Executive Officer, State Library of Victoria, Australia

Mr Chen Chao, Director of Shanghai Library, China

Ms Luthfiati Makarim, Member, Indonesian Library Association

Ms Valentina Kassisieh, Chief Executive Officer, Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation, Jordan

Mr Michael A. Pinto, Immediate Past President, Philippines Librarians Association, Inc.

Mr Ng Cher Pong, Chief Executive Officer, National Library Board, Singapore

**Moderator**

Mr Gene Tan, Senior Director, Special Duties, National Library Board, Singapore