"Always at Work": Canadian Academic Librarian Work During COVID-19

« Toujours au travail » : Le travail du bibliothécaire universitaire canadien pendant la COVID-19

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Abstract / Résumé

To learn about the experiences of librarians working through COVID-19, we conducted semi-structured interviews with academic librarians from across Canada on issues such as workload, collegiality, and overall satisfaction with their working conditions during the pandemic. Themes emerged around job security, workload changes (both in terms of hours worked and the type of work being done), working from home, relationships with colleagues and administrators (including the perceived speed of the institution's pandemic response and the state of communication from or with administration), and hopes for the future. This article focuses on the semantic elements of librarian work during COVID-19 uncovered during thematic analysis, including an in-depth discussion of how academic librarians' workload changed; a second planned article will focus on latent themes on the caring nature of library work. This study connects isolated individual situations with the overall picture of what librarians' work looked and felt like during the COVID-19 pandemic. For library administrators, we identify the ways in which institutional support helped or hindered librarians in doing their work.

Afin de connaître les expériences des bibliothécaires travaillant pendant la COVID-19, nous avons mené des entrevues semi-dirigées auprès de bibliothécaires universitaires à travers le Canada sur des sujets tels la charge de travail, la collégialité et la satisfaction générale à l'égard de leurs conditions de travail pendant la pandémie. Des thèmes ont émergé concernant la sécurité d'emploi, les changements de la charge de travail (tant au niveau des heures travaillées et le type de travail effectué), le travail à distance, les relations avec des collègues et des administrateurs (y compris la vitesse perçue de la réponse institutionnelle face à la pandémie et l'état des communications provenant de l'administration et avec celle-ci), et l'espoir pour l'avenir. Cet article porte sur les éléments sémantiques du travail des bibliothécaires pendant la COVID-19 découverts lors de l'analyse thématique, incluant une discussion approfondie sur la façon dont la charge de travail des bibliothécaires universitaires a changé; un deuxième article portera sur les thèmes latents sur la nature du care au sein du travail en bibliothèque. Cette étude relie des situations individuelles isolées pour offrir un portrait général de ce à quoi ressemblait notre travail et de ce que nous ressentions face à celui-ci durant la pandémie de la COVID-19. Pour les administrateurs des bibliothèques, nous identifions des moyens par lesquels le soutien institutionnel a aidé ou a nui au travail des bibliothécaires.

Keywords / Mots-clés

Introduction

It is not enough to say that the world changed with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic: While collective grief settled inescapably over everyone, the specifics of how, when and why we as individuals felt the effects of either the disease itself or the associated restrictions was inextricable from our unique positionalities. When Canadian libraries and universities shut their doors in March 2020, the researchers—three working mothers with school-aged children—suddenly found ourselves working multiple full-time jobs. Like many women during the COVID-19 pandemic, we were now librarians, teachers, and caregivers, required to keep all three roles in balance while untethered from external support systems. We felt our jobs and our relationships with coworkers and administration changing in myriad ways, occasionally inventive and inspiring but often outside of our control. While we remained grateful for the privilege of working in stable employment from the safety of our homes, our frustrations felt increasingly isolating and overwhelming. We wondered how this situation was affecting other Canadian academic librarians in terms of workload, productivity, and their overall relationships to their colleagues and their work. In essence, our research originated as a panacea for work-related COVID struggles; to ward off worries and feelings of loneliness and isolation, we wanted to locate our experiences within the collective narrative of our profession during this time.

While it became clear that everyone's experience was unique to their individual circumstances, many similarities were identified. Positive work experiences were

associated with flexibility, reliable infrastructure, and practices that prioritized allowances for individual situations. Negative experiences were linked to lack of support, lack of capacity, erosion of boundaries between work and home, and work assignments and activities that were not perceived as meaningful. These themes resurfaced consistently throughout all major discussion areas: the initial pandemic response, changes to workload, experiences of remote work, and relationships with colleagues and administration. Situations that were superficially quite similar, such as working from home, were experienced very differently by participants, depending on their unique contexts. Going forward, it is clear that there is no simple solution to work-life balance that will work for everyone and that cookie-cutter approaches to workload issues will not work. This article focuses on the themes that emerged surrounding the shape of and the major changes to academic librarian work during COVID-19.

Literature Review

Library Work During COVID-19

Little formal literature about the effect of COVID-19 on librarian workload exists, though studies and narratives are slowly starting to emerge. Eva (2021) conducted a survey on Canadian academic librarians' instructional activity during fall 2020, compared to the previous year; results were mixed, but overall requests for instruction were reported as being down due to the pandemic. However, Norton (2021) and Willenborg and Withorn (2021) noted that online instruction was more work than in-person instruction, due to the additional preparation time required. This is an inauspicious factor for librarian workloads and well-being, considering Nicholson's (2019) pre-pandemic findings on the growing prominence of just-in-time reference and instruction services in academic libraries. Withorn and Willenborg (2020) conducted interviews before the pandemic with online instructional librarians and found their workload to be high in general due to the dual nature of their job.

In the area of digital services, Paterson (2021) discussed her experience of managing a library website at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing the necessity of facilitating connections between users and library staff. She concluded that COVID-19 may have "accelerated the transformation of library websites into full-service branches" (Paterson, 2021, p. 14). Levesque (2020) discussed technology fetishism in libraries as part of establishing a magical veneer that obscures "complex organizational infrastructure and skill" (p. 8).

Berg et al. (2021) examined the effect the pandemic had on the research productivity of US academic librarians. Unsurprisingly, they found it was down due to a number of factors including lack of access to resources, increased workload in other areas, changing priorities and multiple demands, and general fatigue due to the ongoing pandemic. Yatcilla and Young (2021) reviewed the library literature published in 2020 and found that the scholarly literature had relaxed peer-review guidelines during this time in the rush to publish first-person accounts, which illustrated the various ways libraries coped with providing online and curbside services and transitioned to working from home.

In a more general investigation of librarian work during COVID-19, Todorinova (2021) surveyed 145 public services librarians about their experiences working remotely and uncovered intriguing possibilities for longer-term remote library work, so long as flexibility was considered and access to the privilege of remote work could be extended further to support staff. Martyniuk et al. (2021) discussed their experiences as new library professionals starting at new workplaces during the pandemic. They concluded that "cultivating a sense of belonging for new hires" is critical and that the remote work environment made this difficult without going above and beyond what previously would have been considered standard (Martyniuk et al., 2021, p. 7). The need to go above and beyond in communication during a pandemic may conflict with O'Neill and Kelley's (2021) study of crisis communication in academic libraries, which 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).

Remote Work

There is a large body of literature on remote work, which has proliferated further during the COVID-19 pandemic. We focused on remote work literature published during the COVID-19 pandemic, because remote work became the default mode for academic librarians during this time. A National Bureau of Economic Research study in the United States found that approximately 50% of the US population worked from home between April and May 2020 (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020). Hernandez and Abigail (2020) conducted a review of previous studies and were primarily concerned that the social isolation of remote work would be harmful to workers' well-being. Galanti et al. (2021) elucidated many of the benefits and drawbacks of the unexpected shift to remote work, including social isolation, conflicts between work and family obligations (including a distracting, crowded environment), and technological unpreparedness. However, they found that many workers felt more autonomous and therefore found their productivity increased. A large-scale study (Awada et al., 2021) found that women, along with higher-income and older workers, reported being significantly more productive while working from home. Several theories were posed for this, including a better work-life balance leading to overall better productivity and women simply preferring to work from home more than men.

However, research on the impact of remote work on gendered labour has so far been mixed; this is particularly relevant to libraries, in which women represent 72% to 74% of the workforce (American Library Association, 2012; Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2017). Adisa et al. (2021) interviewed British women who saw their work-family balance disintegrate during the pandemic. Anderson and Kelliher (2020) echoed this sentiment with their contention that many women do not experience the supposed flexibility of the remote work environment due to additional care responsibilities at home. Power (2020) also noted increased caregiving duties for women during COVID-19. Güney-Frahm (2020) argued that the pandemic would cause a resurgence of neoliberal visions of motherhood, which, among other factors, ignore women's unpaid domestic work so long as they are active participants in the existing labour market.

Pre-pandemic literature on remote work in libraries is rare, given the ubiquity of the library building as a synecdoche for the profession as a whole (see Ettarh, 2018; Hicks, 2016; Revitt, 2020). Craft (2020) examined the pre-pandemic history of remote work in academic libraries' technical services departments, along with benefits and drawbacks, noting that the pandemic has made what was once unique common. This new reality necessitates advice for managers: Obenauf (2021) offered practical tips on managing library employees remotely, while Martyniuk et al. (2021) provided recommendations (drawn from personal experience) for integrating new employees while working apart.

Methodology

Because our goal was to explore individual experiences in-depth, we determined that semi-structured interviews would be the best way to capture participants' thoughts, feelings, and understandings of their work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Guiding interview questions and topics were identified and are included in the Appendix. 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. Previous attempts to capture the phenomenon of librarian work during the COVID-19 pandemic have been through surveys, which inherently capture a wider breadth of experience; however, we wanted the chance both to probe into the depths of participants' experiences and to follow up or clarify any points that were raised.

While our work contains elements of ethnography, given how invested it is in the current culture of academic libraries and the "meanings that its participants ascribe to it" (Asher & Miller, 2011, p. 3), we also draw on the phenomenological tradition of qualitative research, acknowledging that because "we are social and historical beings, our actions come out of the context and situation, the backdrop of history to which they belong" (Fielding, 2017, p. x). The major departure in our approach from either of these traditions is that we identify ourselves as fully entrenched participants in both the culture of academic librarianship and the phenomenon 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. We seek goals of anti-oppressive research: "community-building, empowerment, and more nuanced understandings" (Potts & Brown, 2015, p. 26), and we pursued these interviews in part as a liberatory practice, both to connect individual experiences to broader trends and to provide a measure of catharsis through witnessing.

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, we 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, such as greater job insecurity or having to work on-site while librarians continued to work from home. Librarians in administrative positions were also excluded because we expected—

correctly, it turned out—that relationships with library administration would loom large in many 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 (run by the Alberta Library Association). The researchers also sought participation via Twitter, where both authors are connected to a large network of Canadian academic librarians. Our research strategy was inherently attractive to those librarians who wanted to tell their story, because 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 the three co-investigators and were assigned both based on our availability and to keep the workload distribution even. In a few cases in which study participants had prior work relationships with one or more of the investigators, the participant was offered a chance to interview with a different investigator. 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 end of interviews. Interviews were conducted via online meetings using Microsoft Teams software in March and April 2021, and they generally lasted between 30 and 60 minutes; they were recorded then transcribed by the co-investigators. Transcripts were then reviewed both for accuracy and for assurance of anonymity. In an initial consent form, participants were given the option to review the transcript at this stage; nine participants did so, which resulted in further cursory changes to three of the anonymized transcripts.

The three co-investigators collaborated to determine an inductive coding process for thematic analysis of the anonymized transcripts. Because each of us had transcribed our own interviews, we had a thorough familiarity with our own subset of the data and preliminary ideas of the themes. We were then able to read and review the other investigators' transcripts as an initial way to check our own ideas against the entire data set. A sample transcript was chosen and coded independently by each co-investigator. These initial codes were discussed and collated to create a preliminary coding structure with identified themes and subthemes. The preliminary structure was tested when 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, and they were 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 continued to discuss and work toward disseminating the findings.

Semantic or surface themes related to the shape of the work and commonalities in the changes participants experienced were identified during the coding process, as were latent or underlying themes related to the significance of care and meaning in librarian work. This article focuses on the semantic themes in our attempt to provide an overall picture of academic librarian work during this time.

Participants and Privacy

Participants' privacy and anonymity were taken very seriously. During the interviews and coding process, we noticed myriad similarities across participants' situations; while there was rarely a single detail or circumstance that could be identifying, participants or institutions could potentially be identified through triangulation of multiple facets. For this reason, we have rejected the approach of assigning pseudonyms, which would allow readers to follow study participants through different aspects of their experiences. We have identified any cases in which a participant is quoted or referred to multiple times within a single section of this paper; however, if the same participant is quoted across multiple sections, we have opted not to designate this connection because of the risk of identification. Using the same principle, we have selectively revealed basic demographic information of quoted participants, such as their gender, their career stage (early-, mid-, or late-), or the size of their institution (small, <5000 FTE; medium, 5,000-15,000 FTE; large, 15,000+ FTE [American Council on Education, n.d.; Universities Canada, 2021]) when that information could be relevant to the context of the quotation and would not be identifying.

Because this study is concerned with the nature of academic librarian work, we frequently judged participants' major areas of responsibility within the library to be relevant to our results. Study participants were grouped into major areas of responsibility: Public services librarians, a grouping that included generalist librarians, access services librarians and liaison librarians; health sciences librarians, a group large enough and whose experiences were distinct enough from other types of liaison librarians to warrant their own grouping; scholarly communications librarians, which included those with major responsibilities in scholarly communications, scholarly publishing, open education, and research data management; information literacy librarians, whose major responsibilities were either limited to or primarily concentrated on information literacy instruction (whereas liaison librarians may have information literacy instruction as one of many primary duties); outreach or engagement librarians; and digital services librarians, whose responsibilities may include systems, web services, and e-resources. These groupings do not reflect the actual job titles of study participants.

Finally, because of the importance of participants' stories and the identified purpose of our research as a witnessing practice, we have included a large number of participants' quotations in our results. We have attempted to let participants speak for themselves whenever possible, while we as researchers connect their individual experiences to the larger whole to weave together a holistic story of librarians' work during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Results and Discussion

The results of our study unite themes uncovered in previous research about remote library work (Hernandez & Abigail, 2020; Martyniuk et al., 2021; Todorinova, 2021) and librarian workload (Eva, 2021; Norton, 2021; Willenborg & Withorn, 2021) to create an overall picture of librarian work during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic. First, we discuss the initial closures and pivots to online services, where flexibility was associated with a successful transition, though many participants were frustrated by the lack of support and communication from their administration during this time. We then discuss changes to librarian work as reported by participants; while specific changes varied depending on each participant's major areas of responsibility, in many cases the closure of the library building caused work to shift from visible roles to behind-the-scenes roles. This represents a difficult change, considering Hicks' (2016) findings on the centrality of place and visibility in librarian advocacy. Finally, we relay participants' experiences working from home, where the advantages of flexibility were accompanied by the downsides of isolation and blurred boundaries between work and home life.

Twenty-one librarians answered the call, and 19 interviews were completed during March and April of 2021. Participants came from across Canada and represented 17 different post-secondary institutions. Fourteen participants were women and five were men; this is consistent with the gender identity ratios reported by the CAPAL (2019) *2018 Census of Academic Librarians*, in which 73.58% respondents identified as women, 24.20% as men, and less than 1% as non-binary or other genders. Eleven participants were tenured or permanent employees, while the remainder were tenure-track or permanent-track. Slightly more than half of the participants (n = 10) had been working as librarians at their institutions for 2 to 5 years, another five participants reported working at their institutions for 5 to 10 years, two participants had been at their institutions for more than 15 years, and two participants had been at their institutions for under 2 years and 10 to 15 years, respectively. While all career stages, in terms of years of experience, were represented in the study, only permanent and permanent-track librarians responded to the call; the experiences of librarians with precarious or temporary employment during COVID-19 are therefore not captured by our study.

Initial Pandemic Response

While most universities across the country decided to close the institutions—and their libraries—at almost exactly the same time (the week of March 16, 2020, with March 17 being a very popular closure date), participants' perceptions of how quickly and responsively that change was made varied. Some felt it was done appropriately, with due speed; one commented that they felt like "leadership was really good at allowing us to work remotely, very quickly, which I'm really thankful for"; others felt it was far too slow. Individuals' perceptions were impacted by whether they were located in a COVID-19 hot spot at the time, and whether their library was left open after classes were cancelled and the rest of the institution closed. One participant in such a situation commented that it felt disingenuous to keep the library open while closing the rest of campus:

> So we have almost every chair that a person could put their bum in to study, almost all of that is in our building, ... more than 90%. And so, to be the last ones to shut down, it felt disingenuous; they wanted to close the university, but then they left the busiest place open. We would have liked to have seen that happen faster.

In some cases, where poor communication with administrators existed, library staff were left in a state of uncertainty. In the words of one participant, "I don't think we had hardly any communication from library admin that week. I could be mistaken, but I do remember feeling there was a real vacuum." Many were left in a state of limbo, with some participants reporting that working from home was initially only offered to employees with pre-existing conditions; another participant reported emailing their supervisor daily to renew their working-from-home status. One participant whose work connected closely with the physical library reported that

> things became very unclear because it's like, well, are we closed? Are we open? It's this weird hybrid … because the library was always seen as the one area that doesn't close because students need that space for a myriad of reasons.

O'Neill and Kelley's (2021) study of crisis communication in academic libraries positioned reputational harm, including missed opportunities to "build support, and develop new partnerships" (p. 313) as a major consequence of ineffective communication by libraries to stakeholders. While their study concentrated primarily on external stakeholders, reactions to the communication vacuum in the wake of library closures indicate that these effects may also extend internally to library workers. Todorinova's (2021) survey of public services librarians during COVID-19 supports the idea that a lack of communication from library decision makers was common during the pandemic and was harmful to relationships between library workers and administration.

Though feelings about the speed and manner of their libraries' closures were decidedly mixed, many participants commented on how well their individual work transferred to the virtual, at-home environment. One participant commented, "It's really showed that the library … was able to pivot or, you know, change directions … rather rapidly and successfully." Multiple participants characterized the success of the pivot as something of a surprise; another mused,

> I think there was an expectation at the beginning that everybody would be sitting at home twiddling their thumbs, and they'd be getting a paycheck and not doing any work, because they couldn't. It turns out most of us can do our work online.

Librarians in our study reported that they were given flexibility and autonomy in how they shifted their work. In the words of one participant,

> No one ever came up to me after and they were like, "boo, you cancelled your class, you shouldn't have done that." ... I think people were pretty much left to exercise their professional judgement about whether it's possible to pivot.

While participants generally appreciated the ability to exercise professional judgement, there were certainly instances in which this autonomy emerged from a lack of administrative support. One public services librarian in a mid-sized library said, "I literally took it upon myself to try and create a structure related to public services, where [multiple campuses] were speaking to one another. With no administrative support, (laughs) 'cause there's no cohesion." Having additional support was paramount; our findings here add to Martyniuk et al.'s (2021) assertions that a supportive administration is key to workers' experiences during COVID-19. While Martyniuk et al. discussed the importance of administrative support in onboarding new employees during the pandemic, study participants at all career stages commented on the lack of administrative involvement when transitioning activities online.

In the initial weeks of the pandemic, many participants took on additional duties related to communicating with faculty and the campus community or moving library services online. A librarian working in digital services commented that for their team,

> There was no real lull, you know, our work was not necessarily tied, particularly, to a physical location. Everybody in our team could do the work wherever, remotely …. It just continued to be busy, while also supporting those new initiatives to help our library deliver more content or deliver new services online.

The pivot to online services placed a new emphasis on reliable technology infrastructure. When writing about being a web librarian in the early days of the pandemic, Paterson (2021) noted that rapid changes to the library website were one of the first preoccupations after the library closed. Study participants involved in technology or communication adjustments during the pivot to digital services did not experience a lull in their work, nor did they suffer from the lack of a physical building. In the words of that same digital services librarian, "As soon as everything stopped, it just kept going."

At the time our interviews took place in March and April of 2021, all study participants were working primarily from home and had been since March 2020.

Finding Work, Keeping Work

Participants consistently reported feeling threatened by the possibility of layoffs at their respective institutions; however, no participants reported any layoffs of librarian roles. Much more vulnerable were library support staff or student workers whose jobs were connected with the operational needs of closed library buildings. One participant commented,

> We've seen some permanent layoffs of staff. We also saw a lot of temporary positions not get renewed too … and right now we know some people who are going on mat leave, for example, who will not be getting replaced … . We have on staff a lot of Black women at my campus and a lot of them are the newest hires, and they're awesome, they're great. But when the temp layoffs come

around, it seemed to be done [by] seniority. And a lot of them were the newest hires.

This comment was consistent with findings of Todorinova's (2021) survey, which revealed that a potential downside to adhering to seniority in layoffs was that equity-deserving groups were often disproportionately affected. Because librarianship is already overwhelmingly White (CAPAL, 2019), even occasional layoffs such as these stymie the growth of racial diversity in our profession.

More than the layoffs themselves, the threat of layoffs loomed large over study participants' morale. One participant situated the threats as a tool:

> So luckily, everybody was kept on ... but government at the time … basically said, you need to find 30% in cuts; so morale was really suffering because we thought we would be laid off; more so, I'm sure, the support staff than the librarians (it's harder to lay us off; we're part of our faculty union). But … we had months and months of uncertainty, thinking, "Are we going to be laid off? Are we going to be furloughed?" And in the end we weren't; it was all a posturing kind of exercise to make us so that we wouldn't, you know, protest as much when it was only say 5% in cuts as opposed to 30%, but it was really hard mentally ... to think about that all the time.

Many institutions were able to avoid staff layoffs by redefining the modality of meaningful work, particularly for those frontline staff whose work centred on public service points. Alternate work was found. Often this reassignment involved elements of care and flexibility that the librarians who reported these situations noticed and appreciated. In the words of one study participant,

> I think management tried … gave them, you know, training and development opportunities for them to do. Tried to find other projects that they could do, and if they couldn't find anything they were like, "It's fine, you'll just work from home; you have to be available during these times, but if you don't have work to do, it's fine." And I was shocked by that, to be honest. And no one ended up losing their job or being forced into … taking one day a week off unpaid or anything like that, so we were very, very fortunate in that way.

In many participants' institutions, the project of finding remote work for support staff was a top priority at the beginning of the pandemic. One participant was actively involved in forming "a new kind of working group that was just concerned with what we could get staff to do that was meaningful work, but get them to do remotely and how we would support them in that." Multiple participants alluded to the chronic understaffing of academic libraries as an added incentive to retain staff during the pandemic. As one participant at a smaller university noted, it "made it easier for our [University Librarian] to say, we don't have enough people. We were a skeleton crew to begin with and now we really, you know, we really need the people we have."

While participants suggested librarian positions were more secure due to factors such as being part of faculty unions and having duties less tied to building operations, some librarians reported hiring freezes at their institutions, in addition to temporary or short-term positions, such as for maternity leaves, not being filled. As one participant noted, "We definitely had a hiring chill throughout the library, so I don't think people lost positions, but we definitely didn't hire as quickly as we ordinarily would have." It should again be noted that all study participants were some form of permanent or permanent-track employees. While over 90% of respondents to the CAPAL census were working in some form of permanent or permanent-track positions, Henninger et al. (2020) found that 42.8% of jobs posted on the popular *Partnership Job Board* between November 2017 and November 2019 were to some extent precarious; furthermore, library workers experiencing precarious employment were subject to additional financial, physical, and mental stressors compared with those with stable, ongoing employment (Henninger et al., 2019). Any specific effects of COVID-19 on the job prospects or experiences of precariously employed librarians has yet to be documented. We expect that with the threat of layoffs and the reported lack of new positions, precariously employed librarians may have had a more difficult time finding permanent work during COVID-19; this could be an area for future research.

Workload Shift

All study participants found their workload had shifted in some way over the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, whether due to the hours worked, the type of work being done, or a combination of both. Most participants reported attempting to keep similar hours to what they had done at the office. Several librarians who had to juggle their work times around their children and spouses' schedules were a major exception to that trend:

> I would wake up in the morning and I would work from 5:00 AM to 9:00 AM … then the kids are up and [my husband] got them breakfast and everything, and then I would do childcare from 9 until noon and he would work, and then over lunch we would all be together. And then [specific child situation], and I would work and my husband would work, and my son again would watch a lot of TV.

Many studies and articles have already confirmed the additional care burden placed on women during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Anderson & Kelliher, 2020; Power, 2020); Berg et al. (2021) connected these factors to the decrease in research productivity for academic librarians specifically. Some of the participants with parenting responsibilities reported their unconventional hours reverting back to more regular business hours as childcare services resumed, but for various reasons not all of the participants had chosen to return their children to school or other types of care at the time of our interviews.

Participants were divided on whether they were working more, similar, or fewer hours than before the pandemic. Those few who reported working less did not attribute this change to fewer responsibilities but to pandemic-related factors, such as a decrease in

energy or motivation, similar to the stressors uncovered in Todorinova's (2021) study. One participant commented,

> I was usually pretty good when I went into the office, that I was going in from like 9 to 5. And so I usually keep around those same hours. I would say lately because I've really been struggling with a lack of motivation and a lack of engagement ... those hours have been more like, uhhhhh, 11 to 4.

Health sciences librarians experienced a marked increase in workload for myriad reasons, such as increased communication with health-care professionals during the pandemic, and a huge surge in consultations due to increased knowledge synthesis work in lieu of laboratory research. While health sciences librarians were not the only study participants to experience a workload increase (or even the only participants engaged in knowledge synthesis work), they were the only group in our study to universally report a workload increase. Other public services and information literacy librarians experienced a shift from in-person to recorded or asynchronous instruction, which most participants found took far more time than the usual live instruction. While both Norton (2021) and Eva (2021) found that there were fewer overall requests for librarian instruction during the pandemic, Willenborg and Withorn's (2021) study of online instruction during COVID-19 acknowledged the significant effort required to prepare for this type of instruction. Some librarians noted the difficulties inherent in adjusting to alternate modalities. For example:

> Preparing for teaching is taking a lot more time. I feel like before COVID, I really had a good understanding of what worked for different programs … . Now it's much harder, so it's a lot of experimentation, which sometimes falls flat, unfortunately, but I've gotten better at it, right?

The decrease in instruction requests coinciding with an increase in preparation is exemplar of the shift in librarian work from more visible realms to hidden, behind-the-scenes labour. If Revitt (2020) is correct in characterizing librarian effort and expertise as historically invisible, then the COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated this condition. Study participants were very committed to making pedagogically sound choices within the virtual modalities and to ensuring their choices enhanced student learning; however, the effort involved in these approaches often escaped notice. One participant described her experience adapting her normally live sessions to an asynchronous, virtual approach:

> So I made a video that was introductory, and then I'm having students complete a form where they are individually asking questions. I don't know how many students are in these sections, like 300, maybe each individually asking questions … . There will be some pretty clear themes and then my intent is to make a follow up video that's like, "These are the kinds of questions that you guys have. These are the kinds of answers or direction that I would provide." But all of that is a tight turn around in order to fit within their assignment deadlines and required me initiating that with their faculty members who were like, "can you just make a video of the stuff you do?"

This participant's experience reiterates Nicholson's (2019) speculation that "faculty members had little appreciation for the many demands on librarians' time" (p. 141). Similarly, other participants attributed the additional instructional preparation time to an attempt to adapt to the styles and requests of different faculty members while still serving students. A public services librarian in a large research library said,

> I would say instruction is what I definitely find is kind of twice as much work, often because what happens is that so often we, I try to be flexible for profs, depending on what they prefer, if they prefer asynchronous or synchronous, because I know students have a tough time right now, and I want to be sensitive to their needs too and to the prof's needs as well.

Findings about individual research consultations were mixed; some participants reported far fewer than before the pandemic while others reported a sharp increase; one reported an increase of over 50% from the previous year. Those who discussed an increase mentioned feeling more accessible, either because of the system their library used for booking consultations or because they speculated that a virtual option was attractive to library users who would have previously been unable or disinclined to come to the library building. One participant who noted a sharp increase in consultations speculated on the reason:

> because nobody has to come and meet me one on one in my office … they just don't have to do that anymore. Because of the nature of my work, I deal with graduate students, postdocs, and faculty, and they are either not here or they're busier than undergrads, or whatever. So, I have a lot of consults, there's been a spike around that, which is great. That means I get to talk to more people one on one and help them with their problems.

Study participants more often reported that their job had changed in general rather than identifying any specific increases or decreases to assigned duties. One participant summarized her thoughts:

> My workload has not increased, it has changed. And yeah, there was a … huge learning curve so ... I think about this as, OK, am I stressed out and feeling exhausted and just depleted because it's COVID and it's the world? or because all of this stuff is new and it's learning and it's screen time and it's exhausting? And, so yeah. I wish I could say yes, my workload has definitely, you know, gone from here to here. I just feel so much like mine ... it's just as much, it's just changed.

The experience of feeling the effects of many different changes and stressors all at once and not knowing quite where each feeling was coming from was common among participants. Uncertainty was the most commonly cited source of stress, particularly because at the time of our interviews, most participants' institutions were in the early phases of planning a return to in-person learning. All participants expressed a desire to maintain at least some aspect of their COVID-19-motivated adaptations; concerns centred around whether that flexibility would be supported.

Infrastructure

Supporting infrastructure, and the extent to which the institution provided it, had a huge impact on individuals' ability to do remote work effectively. Institutional financial support varied in terms of internet upgrades and hardware. Craft (2020) echoed these concerns in her study of remote work in library technical services departments, noting that resource disparities can exacerbate existing equity issues. While some institutions provided their staff with laptops to work from home (either routinely or as a result of the pandemic), and some allowed staff to bring office equipment home, other institutions left workers to their own devices in terms of accessing the equipment they needed for their jobs:

> I am using my own ... financial resources from home ... so I'm using an old desktop here, and my own laptop; I have not brought any computer stuff from work … . I have to come to meetings 20 minutes early so ... my poor computer can go rrrrrrrr and try to ... I've also bought this camera … . I didn't get reimbursed for any of this stuff … . We were told at one point that we could use PD funds to buy a laptop, and there was sort of mixed messages about that from different stakeholders so it was never clear, and honestly, it's, you know, I'm tired.

Participants working at home with partners or children who were also having online meetings sometimes experienced bandwidth issues; some participants experienced difficulties with consistent internet connections, regardless of others in the home. These technical issues added considerable stress on top of everything else and highlighted the need for institutions to be able to adequately support employees working from home:

> Tech issues have been a consistent challenge with things, and it's not that I … can't go and buy a new laptop, it's not that, but my laptop wasn't meant to be on this long, to have all these apps; you know, recently I downloaded Camtasia to redo online videos and that kind of crashed my laptop. So now I have to get rid of that. So yeah, tech issues [are] just very daunting.

The steep learning curve of new remote-work software also added complexity in the absence of clear support and direction, as illustrated by this quotation:

> [Our institution] started to roll out a bunch of virtual workplace tools and do all this stuff that was helpful but no one knew how to use. You know, like what platform should we be on? What should we be doing? Where should we be storing files? Where can we make things? We had a lot of issues with getting to our network drives. It requires for us a VPN connection, which bogged everything down. I can't use it on my computer and use video conferencing at the same time because they crash. They're fundamentally at odds [both interviewer and participant laugh], and you know, lots of people, myself included, had home Internet that was insufficient for the volume that was going on.

These difficulties mirror Galanti et al.'s (2021) findings. While all of the interviewees were able to work from home, several mentioned colleagues who were forced to work from their library office due to insufficient internet at home.

One study participant who had a primary role in digital services provided helpful insight regarding some of these technology struggles from the perspective of someone involved in digital services work:

> Big projects and big plans, they require staff. They require people and we cannot just keep on using existing resources to keep on … "Let's do another service," you know. As I mentioned before, we are introducing new tools, a new service, which is great … [but] people kind of forget the fact that now you have to maintain that service. So, you gotta do the upgrades. You gotta do the backup. And the more you add, that's more things you gotta do. So appreciating that nuance about the difference between, you know, launching a product or launching a new service and maintaining the underlying application is sometimes lost. And if you want to be doing things correctly, well … either more staffing or you're going to have to, you know, reduce your ambitions.

The remote work circumstances were ripe for encouraging Levesque's (2020) technological fetishism because they mediated even more of the library's services through technology, but as the digital services librarian's comment suggests, the hidden labour of maintaining that additional infrastructure is creating an unreasonable load for many librarians. When technology is viewed as a solution or a fallback plan in a crisis, the real costs, effort, people power, and ethical implications are ignored for the sake of efficiency.

Always at Work

Participants shared many very similar situations regarding their respective home offices, but individual contexts were crucial in shaping their experiences and opinions of these situations. These results reflect Galanti et al. (2021)'s findings that some individuals found working at home distracting, while others found they were much more productive in their home environment.

Family often complicated the physical workspace; some study participants reported working in the same room as their children or partners, and this could be particularly complicated if family members had online meetings at the same time. Some were fortunate to have well-equipped, private offices; others worked from their couch, kitchen table, or laundry room. While the home offices weren't ideal for all, for some they were far preferable to the workspace available to them in the library. In the words of one participant:

> My workspace was a shared workspace so I ... didn't have an office with a door that I could close, so I was in this big open space with sometimes five other people also in the open space, and so I'm actually able to concentrate and work

so much better at home. … My partner [works outside of the home] so I'm home alone all day and it's glorious.

These experiences echo Awada et al.'s (2021) findings that working from home increased productivity among certain demographics. However, privacy and ability to focus factored largely in comments about whether study participants preferred their office at home or in the library. In contrast to the participant above, whose library workspace was shared, another participant said:

> When I'm in office, I can just close the door and people generally respect that as I am focusing on something. I'll leave my door open, if like, people can interrupt me, it's not a big deal, but if my door's closing, I can focus. But it's been a lot harder to do that from home. ... It's much harder to sit down and concentrate and write a thing, or even work on a presentation when there's just so much happening around you. So, I have found it very difficult to focus. Again, especially in the last like handful of months because now it's just lasted for so damn long.

The physical space one has at home to work in (or lack thereof), as well as whether others are also trying to work from home at the same time, affects whether one feels like working from home is optimal.

One aspect of remote work that was almost universally seen as an advantage by participants was the absence of a commute to and from the office. One participant summarized the advantages, saying: "I can roll out in my sweatpants and sit down and just start working. I love that." Even more than the simplicity of rolling out of bed and into the home office, several participants perceived remote work as an advantage for connecting across multiple campuses and simplifying off-campus professional responsibilities. One librarian working on a satellite campus of a larger university described her experience of this shift:

> So, whenever there were meetings that were held on the [main] campus, which were all the meetings, right, we would have to travel there … . And so that would be huge chunks of my time just spent going to the [main] campus, and then sometimes returning or sometimes going home after that. So now, because we're all remote, all those meetings are just held virtually, so I would say I spend less time commuting to meetings at another campus, which has been great.

Despite Anderson and Kelliher's (2020) findings that women may not experience the touted flexibility of remote work, some participants with small children nevertheless appreciated the advantages of working from home, including online meetings, and hoped that in the future they might maintain some of that flexibility. Participants with children found the increased time they had without a commute to and from work was a welcome relief from the normal day-to-day rush of a working parent. For example:

> The panicked run to the streetcar stop … to make it to the daycare before six o'clock is no longer a thing. … I feel like we're probably a little more present in the school lives of our kids. ... Part of that is because of the online learning that

we had to do. … We sort of became the teaching support, but even beyond that, even now that they are back in school, it just feels like we have extra time for homework, for conversations, just for family life … which I think, for me, has been the biggest benefit. I think, as working parents, we were always walking that tightrope and it's just, it's refreshing to not have to do it.

Many found benefits in the flexibility, particularly if they had children; one mother noted using her "lunch break" to pick up her child from school midday, and a father noted his ability to take his child to a particular school program and work in his car, borrowing nearby wi-fi while working on his laptop. Güney-Frahm (2020) may be correct about how unpaid domestic labour continues to be overlooked, but at least there is no commute to deal with.

However, the ability to work from home and the corresponding lack of commute resulted in the loss of a mental break between work and home:

I'm always at work, right? ... So, yeah, never being away from work doesn't give you that transition, doesn't let you say "OK, now I'm not at work anymore." ... So, it's the fact that you never leave, but also there is no transition to allow you even mentally to say, "Well I'm not doing that anymore, I'm doing something else, you know, helping my kid with his homework, or we're all going for a walk or whatever, making dinner, laundry, the usual."

Some participants felt obliged to be available at all times due to the variable working times of their colleagues:

But there is that sort of thing in the back of my head, like oh maybe I should respond right away … whereas before there was that separation between work and home and now ... it's just fully online, then why not? Like getting Teams messages, you know, after 7pm. It's like, well do I respond to this? I don't really want to but, you know the person on the other end, maybe this is the only time that they can send that, so there's that weird sort of nebulous like, "What is this, what's going on?"

Craft (2020) noted that difficulties maintaining work-life balance are not new to remote work situations; the main difference caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is that remote work immediately shifted from being an unconventional arrangement in academic libraries to the norm for all types of librarians. With workloads that were already encroaching into home life before the pandemic (Nicholson, 2019), remote work could only exacerbate the erosion of boundaries.

While participants had mixed feelings about working from home overall, they experienced both increased freedom and elements of the isolation predicted by Hernandez and Abigail (2020) and Galanti et al. (2021). Several participants noted slippage of time without routine markers, along with the accompanying need to make a conscious effort to protect their time in a much more deliberate way than in the past. At the time of our interviews, after a year of working from home, study participants did not

report having found any notable strategies to ensure a healthy separation between life and work.

Conclusion

Regardless of how participants experienced their time at the beginning of the pandemic, almost all of them had some sort of revelation about how they hoped their work, or the world, would change as a result of our collective experience. One participant stated,

> I do think being in the office, being present, talking to people in person, being able to drop by a colleague's office, seeing students walk up to the desk and being able to help them side by side, I think those were just things that we could take for granted before and I'm hoping there's more of an appreciation and enjoyment of that when we get back than even we had pre-COVID.

The interviews conducted during this study illustrated lessons that can be learned from this time to improve academic libraries and the lives of library workers. This article was not able to cover the full breadth of participants' experiences; we plan to write future articles using this study to discuss the centrality of care to librarian work and the possibility of a "new normal" in academic librarian work. Every interviewee had thoughts about how the changes caused by the pandemic could make their libraries more functional and better places to work. Many study participants benefited from efficiencies found in working from home, or improved work-life balance facilitated by the ease of online meetings and consultations. The changes initiated by COVID-19 allowed librarians to step back and consider their work from a new perspective; while these changes affected every participant in a unique way, participants were united in the approval of flexibility and the hope that it would continue. The pandemic created conditions for librarians to reflect on what seemed to be critical to their work, what seemed to be superfluous, and how much they felt they were getting from their work. While resignations or the desire to leave librarianship were not reported among this study's interviewees as they were by some of Todorinova's (2021) survey participants, our participants were routinely questioning how and why things had to be a certain way, whether it was going into the office or elements of their jobs that no longer seemed necessary. The time for capitalizing on these changes is now.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix

Guiding Interview Questions

Before Starting:

- Review consent form and purpose of study

- Ask for any questions

- Start recording

Demographic questions:

Gender:

Employment status (i.e. tenured/permanent, probationary, limited term, part-time):

Length of time at current workplace:

Position Title:

How many members are in your household?

- Number of dependents:

Tell me briefly about your position at the library.

Initial Response

Tell me about your library's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. What were the most immediate changes made?

- Your role in these changes?

- Feelings about these changes?

- Has your library been affected by layoffs or furloughs? If so, how did these affect you, either personally or in your work performance?

Now:

What is your work situation now?

- Do you work primarily from home? The office? Elsewhere?

- Tell me about your work hours now.

- What is your daily schedule like? How many hours do you typically work in a week?

- Comparison to pre-COVID

- Describe any changes in your living situation in terms of members in your household? Do they work from home, outside the home, do domestic labor, or attend school?

- Have the changes described above affected your own work? If so, in what way(s)?

What are your library's plans for re-opening? What is your expected role? How will it impact your work schedule/location?

Tell me about one of your job duties that you spend MORE time on now than you did before COVID.

Tell me about one of your job duties that you spend LESS time on now.

Since COVID-19, have you been asked to take on any new duties that were not previously part of your workload?

- How or why did these duties fall to you?

- How do they fit with the rest of your workload?

- Did you require any additional training?

Tell me about how COVID-19 has affected your relationship and communication with colleagues.

Tell me about how COVID-19 has affected your relationship and communication with administration.

When I say the phrase "back to normal," what is the first thing you think of?

How do you feel about your job now?

Is there anything else you'd like to share about how COVID has impacted your workload? and/or your relationship with your work?

Debrief:

- Remind participant about various supports and withdrawal procedures