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ACADEMIC LIBRARIES IN UNUSUAL SITUATIONS

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KEYWORDS: Academic Libraries. Crisis. Crisis management. Unusual situations. University of Warsaw Library. Pandemic. COVID-19.

ABSTRACT: **Thesis / purpose** of the article – the aim of the article is to present the situation of academic libraries during the COVID-19 pandemic, with particular emphasis on the University of Warsaw Library. **Method** – analysis of the literature, analysis of the situation of the University of Warsaw Library in March-May 2020 on the basis of unpublished reports of heads of BUW organizational units and the author's own observations and experiences. **Results / conclusions** – the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic and the size of the risks associated with it cannot be compared with any previous experience of academic libraries, therefore the libraries did not have ready-made procedures and procedures. The example

of the University Library in Warsaw shows that in the period of lockdown and remote work, institutions were able to learn and gather valuable experience for future use.

Academic libraries should be used to changes. The largest group of users of academic libraries, functioning within the university structures, are students; academic librarians are therefore accustomed to the constant overturning of that group, occurring in regular cycles the length of which is determined by the duration of their studies. New students keep coming, often completely unaware of customs and traditions in the library of their university, expecting – rightly – that the library will meet their expectations. Usually, it does. As its audience changes, so do the possibilities for satisfying its needs. For a long time, libraries – especially academic libraries – have offered a wide selection of online licensed and open access resources to which they provide access, alongside their physical collections. Some recipients of their services perceive an academic library as a set of services, but the library as a space, for at least some, remains important. Finally, the relations between the library and its users are changing. In the past, the readers' expectation that the building would be open with its collections available 24/7 seemed extravagant. Today, libraries are more understanding of such demands and extend their opening hours as much as their organizational and financial resources allow, not only as a part of one-off actions ("Night of the Libraries"), but also for longer periods, especially during winter and summer examination sessions (Grygrowski, 2019; Grygrowski, 2020).

Change, then, seems to be a natural state for contemporary libraries.

However, in all of these areas changes progressed gradually, giving people and institutions time for adjustment. Such changes, properly carried out, do not cause crises. It does not mean that crises do not occur, but they may involve different areas and it such experiences are more difficult to generalize.

In the literature on the subject, one can find many articles on crisis situations in libraries, but these texts mainly pertain to natural disasters, and thus they focus on institutions in areas threatened by earthquakes, hurricanes, and tsunamis (Superio et al., 2019). Libraries which experienced natural disasters also share their experiences (Corrigan, 2008). In such cases, the authors describe physical, often irreversible, destruction of buildings and collections, a struggle to preserve what could be saved and to return to normal activities – in financial and organizational terms. An important issue here is the need for disaster response plans prepared in advance and systematically updated after each new experience.

The 2008 financial crisis, which affected libraries alongside other institutions (e.g. Powell, 2010; Spadafora, 2012), also has its own literature.

The authors focus on questions of how to adjust to significantly worsened financial conditions and how to succeed in difficult circumstances.

Finally, libraries want to share experiences of isolated crisis situations – as in a text on crisis communication at the Marriott Library in Utah regarding a forced, two-day (!) closure due to a plague of bedbugs (Soehner et al., 2017). It would seem, therefore, that neither the previous experience of academic libraries, with the changeability of their audiences as a part of their normal operations, nor professional knowledge grounded in the subject literature, could prepare libraries for the coronavirus pandemic, which we have been dealing with for five months.

A common element of various discussions occurring from the first days of the pandemic is the belief that this is a shockingly new situation, incomparable to any previous event; we cannot understand it by extrapolating from our previous experiences, or predict its scale.

CLOSING, RESTRICTIONS, CANCELLATION

The first signals of the impending danger appeared in January 2020. First, universities recommended the cancellation of trips to China, then in February it was suggested to limit contact with northern Italy as well. In early March, the rector of the University of Warsaw (UW) recommended reducing domestic mobility and cancelling events with a large number of participants planned.

On March 10, the UW decided to suspend all full-time classes at the university (initially until April 14, and finally until the end of the summer semester). Open events were cancelled, business trips were suspended, and the University Library (BUW) was closed. The Minister of Science and Higher Education finally decided to suspend classes at all public and private universities in Poland on March 11, 2020 (Łukaszewska 2020). Most of academic libraries in Poland were closed by decision of the university authorities on the 11th or 12th of March. The intensive e-mail correspondence between the library directors shows that they all used this opportunity to plan various cleaning operations that were impossible to carry out while maintaining regular activity. For a time, it was possible to assume that while other institutions would be closed, librarians would continue to work as before. Soon, however, universities began to reduce the duty to work and the entire activity of libraries moved online.

Early spring is usually the time when librarians spend planning their conference activities, including participation in major international events. This year, however, the pandemic affected global library organizations, and conferences were either postponed or re-formatted. The OCLC EMEA

RC conference[1] "Library Futures" scheduled for March 2-5 in Vienna, with the expected participation of librarians from 27 countries, was cancelled in the last days of February. The place of the event had long been chosen, the program had been formulated in detail, and it can be assumed that most of the participants had purchased airline tickets. OCLC, bearing in mind the safety of participants, speakers and organizers, decided to move the conference for the next year – it is to be held in the same place in early spring. Other OCLC regional councils were more fortunate: Americas RC had held its conference in Phoenix in October 2019, and Asia Pacific RC had held its conference in Singapore in November 2019.

The OCLC Global Council meeting scheduled for the second half of March, traditionally held at the company's headquarters in Dublin, Ohio, has been moved online[2]. Similarly, the elections to the Board of Trustees were held remotely. The OCLC made no compromises: each of the four candidates gave an online self-presentation and answered the questions prepared by the Nominating Committee. Everything happened as it would have been an actual Global Council meeting. Out of all library organizations with a global reach, OCLC made the most visible effort to support libraries in the pandemic, running a COVID-19/Information service and offering resources to help (https://www.oclc.org/en/covid-19.html), promoted by the slogan *We're in this together*.

In March, one could still hope that the pandemic would end soon and would not threaten the organization of other library events. It soon became clear, however, that this year neither the LIBER conference scheduled for the end of June in Belgrade, nor the IFLA Congress planned for August in Dublin, Ireland, would take place. LIBER (Ligue des Bibliothèques Européennes de Recherche) decided to hold its 49th annual conference entirely remotely during the week of June 22-26, 2020. It was possible to register and take part, free of charge and without any restrictions on the number of participants. It was an opportunity which many librarians eagerly took – 2,000 people participated in the LIBER online sessions, exceeding by many times the number of participants from the previous years when the conferences were held in a traditional form[3]. A record of all sessions is available on the organization's website. It is commendable that LIBER, which lists open access, openness in science and science communication among its main areas of interest, has used the full openness of

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[1] Online Computer Library Catalog Europe, Middle East, Africa Regional Council.

[2] I had the opportunity to write a few words about this on the blog of the University of Warsaw Library http://buwlog.uw.edu.pl/doroczne-konferencje-oclc-zdalnie

[3] The conference was described in detail and enthusiastically from the point of view of BUW librarians on BuwLOG: http://buwlog.uw.edu.pl/liber-online-2020-49th-annual-conference, http://buwlog.uw.edu.pl/liber-2020-online-new-trends-in-civic-science, http://buwlog.uw.edu.pl/liber-2020-online-fairsfair

its annual conference to face the crisis affecting many European libraries and librarians.

The success of the LIBER conference proves that less panache and more economy in organization does not have to mean smaller scale. We hope to meet in Belgrade next year, at the 50th jubilee LIBER conference, planned for 23-25 June 2021.

The organizers of the annual IFLA Congress, traditionally scheduled for the second half of August, had more time than other organizations to make a decision. On April 9, a joint statement by the IFLA board and the Irish organizing committee announcing the decision to cancel the Congress appeared on the IFLA website. There was no plan to transfer it to an online platform, which is understandable in the case of this particular organization. Annual IFLA congresses gather crowds of participants (3,100 in Wrocław, 2017; 3,500 in Kuala Lumpur, 2018; 3,600 in Athens, 2019): personal contact among participants and meetings of steering committees of several dozen sections are as important as the speeches of the speakers. An online IFLA might have gone awry. We all hope that the Rotterdam congress will be held as planned in 2021. Next year, IFLA will return to Dublin, while in 2023 it will again attempt to organize its conference in Auckland[4].

IFLA has a COVID-19 FAQ on its website[5] with the information regarding the operating of its administration in the present situation. Next to it, we find the information service "COVID-19 and the Global Library Field"[6] with information materials. The organization maintains constant contact with its members, e.g. through mailings, which did not slacken during the pandemic. IFLA's activity is the best proof of how much can be done online. For example, it is currently collecting declarations to transform the Special Interest Group Environment, Sustainability and Libraries into a new section.

National events were cancelled for the same reasons as major international library conferences. Some of these are to take place in autumn 2020.

THE UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW LIBRARY IN A PANDEMIC SITUATION

I will present the situation of my institution in three aspects – people, collections/services, and space – with full awareness that the boundaries are slightly blurred. This model has informed our thinking about the lib-

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[4] Auckland was originally planned as a location for 2020, but the event was also postponed due to the fact that the construction of the planned congress venue - New Zealand International Convention Center - is still not completed.

[5] https://www.ifla.org/covid-19

[6] https://www.ifla.org/covid-19-and-libraries

rary, as well as our formulation of the institution's strategy for 2019-2023 (Strategy, 2020).

People

In the BUW Strategy for 2019-2023, we wrote that "The University of Warsaw Library is an entity whose aim is to actively support the community of the University of Warsaw in the research and teaching processes". We have identified members of the UW community as priority users: academic teachers, employees who are not academic teachers, doctoral candidates, and students. When planning the activities of the University of Warsaw Library in the period after March 10, when the building was no longer available, we tried to fulfil that aim as far as possible. As is usually the case in relations between the institution and the recipients of its services, communication is the key. This was carried out all the time, without any obstacles, through electronic channels (e-mails, instant messaging, chat). The Information Centre's telephone line resumed operation on the day that temporary lending was launched (May 18).

In this unusual situation, informal channels turned out to be even more important than ever. Thanks to the contacts established in this way, it was possible to better understand and take care of the needs of our users. It appears that the principle written into the strategy of the University of Warsaw Library that "BUW is an institution friendly to users from outside the University of Warsaw" was impossible to follow during the pandemic. In fact, we could not offer people outside the UW community anything – no access to traditional or electronic collections. We could not offer the former because the building was unavailable, the latter – because of the terms of the license agreements.

When thinking about people in the context of the effect of the pandemic on the University of Warsaw Library, one cannot fail to mention the employees. 244 people working in the library found themselves in a completely new situation overnight. The managerial challenge was to organize their work in such a way as to ensure smooth implementation of the few services that we could still offer, and to make good use of the working hours of each employee working remotely. Out of the organizational units of the University of Warsaw Library, only the NUKAT Centre had significant experience with this mode of work, and we often relied on their expertise . Effective communication was crucial in relations between the BUW management and the heads of organizational units of the library, as well as in the relations between managers and employees: setting clear expectations, sending and receiving periodic reports, and finally keeping spirits up. At the beginning of the lockdown period, the workload was unevenly distributed. The organization of remote work on a large scale was made possible by the IT Department, thanks to whom it was possible

to gradually configure VPNs on the devices of those employees who had not used it thus far. The Information Services and Training Department invariably had many responsibilities, mainly to ensure effective communication with users. Numerous tasks were performed by the Administration Department, especially the financial services. Despite the new rules of document circulation introduced by the Bursar's Office of the University of Warsaw, most cases required the presence of BUW employees on the spot. In the departments working with collections or readers on a daily basis, remote work often involved catching up on specialist literature – an activity difficult to fit into the course of daily work. From personal contacts with BUW employees, I know that many of them appreciated this moment of reduced workload and the opportunity to read texts that they should long have been familiar with. It should be noted, however, that this type of work organization makes sense only for a limited period. The prolonged lack of contact with the institution, team, and current tasks does not have a good effect on the institution or the employees.

The University of Warsaw Library made sure to maintain contact with users by publishing photos of its employees, working remotely, on Instagram (#teamBUW). The employees published their photos, showing what their home offices, the places from which they still work for BUW, look like. After a gradual return to the workplace, started posting photos of people working in the library under the sanitary regime (#BUWdlaWas). An important aspect of work organization during the pandemic was the need to ensure the mental well-being of employees. Some people working at the University of Warsaw Library coped with this new situation admirably well: they enthusiastically learned new communication methods and enjoyed the opportunity to use their free time to catch up with work. However, other employees were understandably anxious about their own fate, the health of their relatives, and the future of their workplace. These fears were only partially dispelled by contact with superiors or colleagues. The webinars offered by the University of Warsaw turned out to be a significant source of support. As a part of the Academy of Leaders project (an element of ZIP – Integrated Development Program of the University of Warsaw), management teams could attend online meetings on the following subjects: "Managing your own and employees' emotions in a situation of change and remote work", "How to build one's own and one's employees' involvement – specifics of remote work and work in isolation" and "Assertive communication and cooperation in remote working mode". The session "How to deal with emotions and stress related to remote work" was open to all, so everyone could take part.

The library was also supported by one of the training companies with which we have previously cooperated: it offered two online meetings, "I have the POWER" with further suggestions for supportive reading and

exercises to complete independently. For the majority of BUW employees, this period of remote work has been a difficult, albeit interesting, experience: an unplanned training ground to test out hypothetical scenarios for the future.

Collections / services

BUW's physical collections became unavailable overnight. When on March 10, the Rector of the University of Warsaw decided to close the Library the following day, we made an *ad hoc* decision to increase the loan limit to 20 volumes per person: most of the readers present at the University of Warsaw Library that day eagerly took advantage of the new limit. The loan desk was open until midnight, and with the devices for self--service loans and returns further supporting the queue. The system registered 8,000 transactions, 2,331 of which were in self-service terminals (the average daily borrowing is 1,478 volumes). From March 11, BUW limited its offerings to e-resources. While the UW CRISPA digital library has in its resources public domain objects, available to all recipients without any restrictions, the licensed resources have become inaccessible to readers from outside the University of Warsaw – those who up until now have been using electronic journals and databases on site. The rich offer of the University of Warsaw Library collections has been significantly limited.

The author of an unpublished report on the activities of the Information Services and Training Department during the remote work period, accurately observed that: "During this extraordinary time it became evident how important its scientific infrastructure should be for each university and how much the University of Warsaw and the University of Warsaw Library have so far supported students and scientists from other universities. During the time when libraries' activities were limited, it became clear that a BUW card with the right to borrow and use e-collections is a privilege" (Książczak-Gronowska, 2020).

The University Library in Warsaw was ready to expand its e-book offer to meet the expectations of its readers. It turned out, however, that these expectations could be met only to a limited extent, as not all the titles required were available for purchase, and not all expenses were within the library's budget. A significant increase in the prices of e-books has been noticeable in recent times, causing justified frustration among academic librarians (Anderson, 2020).

The library also ceased to provide services that could not be carried out remotely (e.g. copying collections).

From mid-March, the University of Warsaw Library provided its readers only with information services provided via electronic communication channels: mail, chat, Ask a Librarian, messenger, regularly updated website and social media. Contact was much more intensive than in pre-

vious periods. The chat service "Ask a Librarian" was until 2020 viewed as a tool of decreasing usefulness, but over the ten weeks between mid--March and the end of May it facilitated 590 interviews (by comparison, in the entire year of 2019 only 352 such interviews were noted)[7].

The Information Services and Training Department, responsible for informing readers about the library's operational mode, the availability of collections, and the scope of services provided, modified the content of the library website on an ongoing basis. The website was modified almost 400 times in that period. Aside from updating the website, the library provided the information regarding its functioning on social media (Facebook and Instagram).

Space

Before the pandemic, the longest break in access to the BUW building had been the period when the library was moving from Krakowskie Przedmieście to the new building in Powiśle in 1999 – from July 19 to December 15, a total of 149 days. This time, the break will be longer. BUW was closed to its users on March 11, 2020; one can hope we will return to normal functioning with the commencement of classes at the University of Warsaw, scheduled for October 15. On April 27, a trezor, a device for returning books, appeared in front of the library door. On May 18, we started lending books in a room temporarily not used for other purposes on the ground floor of the library building, adapted to the needs of the library. With the support of the university administration, it was possible to quickly organize and equip the space in such a way that book borrowing would be safe for readers and librarians. Service points are equipped with plexiglass shutters, readers are required to wear a mask and disinfect hands, employees wear masks or visors. Before entering the room, the reader's body temperature is measured using a non-contact thermometer; people with a temperature higher than 37 degrees Celsius are not allowed inside. The library carefully ensures maintenance of distances in the queue – the appropriate markings are glued to the floor. The surfaces are systematically disinfected and the books are quarantined for five days after they are returned. Precise control of the movement of people and collections would not be possible inside the BUW, which is an open space.

The free access area is still closed. We made use of this time to clean, remove old and damaged furniture, clean chairs and carpets, and re-organize visual information. Work in this space goes on comfortably, without disturbing anyone, but with full awareness that a library closed to readers is a contradiction in itself. This space should serve people. In recent years,

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[7] These and subsequent figures from the already mentioned OUIS Activity Report on March 11-31, 2020 [mat. unpublished].

we have taken many steps to increase the availability of our building even more – extending the duration of the "BUW for owls" campaign and opting not to shorten the opening hours during the summer holidays. The current situation is therefore definitely exceptional.

WHAT'S AFTER THE CORONA CRISIS?

The Rector of the University of Warsaw, prof. Marcin Pałys, at the meeting of the University Senate on June 24, 2020, conducted remotely (as all meetings of this body have been from April 2020), summarizing the atypical end of his and the Senate's term of office and referring to the exceptional situation of recent months, recalled a saying attributed to Churchill: *Never waste a good crisis*. And it seems that this will be the real challenge – to draw conclusions from a crisis situation that can be referred to in other crisis situations and during regular activity.

Forums for the exchange of experiences and sharing opinions on the current situation appeared very early on. COVID-19 Roundtable, organized as part of the online OCLC Global Council meeting, had an open formula: it allowed participants to share their experiences, but also feelings about the situation, to admit helplessness, and to complain of stress related to an uncertain future. The editors of the American Libraries Live website allowed a similar discussion, organizing a series of webinars under the common title of "Libraries and COVID-19", devoted to the following issues: *Managing Strategies and Stress* (March 20), *Providing Virtual Services* (March 26), *Considering Copyright during a Crisis* (April 3 and 17), *Using 3D Printing to Make Personal Protective Equipment* (April 9), *Reimagining Programming during a Pandemic* (June 1)[8]. Two editions of a webinar on the organization of remote work were conducted by EBSCO: during the first one, on April 2, 2020 ("Library on the Internet – how to organize remote work for librarians and readers"), the following participants spoke about their experiences: Ewa Kobierska-Maciuszko, Centrum NUKAT ("Experience in remote work from the perspective of the central catalog"), Anna Grygorowicz, Library of the Medical University of Gdańsk ("Supporting research needs online from the point of view of the medical library"), Izabela Gajda, Library of the Łódź University of Technology ("Library on the Internet – remote work of librarians and readers of the Łódź University of Technology Library during the suspension of classes at TUL due to the SARS-CoV-2 virus threat ")[9]. In the second, which took place on April 23 ("Library on the Internet – remote work of librarians as support for stu-

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[8] A record of all webinars is available at https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/al-live/
[9] https://www.ebsco.com/e/pl-pl/blog/biblioteka-w-internet-jak-zorganizowa-prac-zdaln-bibliotekarzy-i-czytelni

dents and lecturers"), the speakers were Dr. Leszek Szafrański, Jagiellonian Library ("Open access to library collections in the age of a pandemic – experience from remote work at the Digital Collection Department of the Jagiellonian Library "), Monika Gościk, Library of the Academic State University of Pope John Paul II in Biała Podlaska ("Will emergency solutions become standardized – and which ones – based on the example of remote work of the PSW Academic Library in Biała Podlaska")[10].

Relatively early, there were attempts to consider specific areas of social life and to assess the impact of the pandemic on them (Chamera-Nowak, Kisilowska, 2020). Dr Bożena Jaskowska from the University of Rzeszów attempted to systematically gather the experiences of librarians from the pandemic period in a comprehensive survey "Managing academic libraries during a pandemic – practices, barriers and challenges" – the results of this study are to be published soon..

We might distinguish two, markedly different, periods of the current crisis. In the first one, after the regular operation of the institution was suspended, the focus was on the continued provision of on-line services. The example of the University of Warsaw proves how intense such activities might be. As Katarzyna Łukaszewska writes in the "UW Journal". "So far, about 700 e-courses have been offered annually on the university's e-learning platform. Now this number was about to rise rapidly. Thanks to the huge efforts of teachers and the Digital Competence Centre (CKC) staff who support them, 1,371 new e-classes were made available on the Kampus platform within 10 days. [...] The interest in remote classes was so great that CKC launched an additional platform for their implementation. In total, 2,481 new courses were launched on the two platforms from mid--March to early June, with 36,524 students attending. The lecturers could also use other IT tools enabling remote lectures, e.g. G Suite for Education. The Department of Computer Networks supported them in this, running a special Facebook group 'DSK Usługi IT', which over 1000 people signed up for. Before March 10, 65 classes were conducted in Google Classroom, and by March 23, 900 were launched. From mid-March to June, 8,808 unique videoconferences with the use of Google Meet were conducted" (Łukaszewska, 2020, p. 6). The libraries mentioned above operated with a similar intensity.

The second period was marked by a gradual return to regular activity. Here, the most important thing was (and remains) to conduct this activity effectively and safely. This temporary stage will probably last until we are sure that the full opening of buildings and running of services in a manner employed before the pandemic is completely safe for users and employees.

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[10] https://www.ebsco.com/e/pl-pl/blog/biblioteka-w-internecie-zdalna-praca-bibliotekarzy-wsparciem-studentow-i-wy" \h

What lessons will we learn from the pandemic? We should be aware that remote operation of the university was a good solution for surviving the lockdown, but it should not become the dominant business model. The chairman of the Conference of Rectors of Academic Schools in Poland explicitly addressed this issue: "Distance learning will not replace direct relations between students and lecturers. Studies are not only about rigid knowledge, information, and procedures, but also intellectual formation. You won't get this remotely. Yes, some people may like the current situation and the solutions applied, because, for example, they do not have to come to work every day, but it has nothing to do with the real activities of the university. [...] This is a temporary solution, and certainly not a target"(Szmidt, 2020).

Academic libraries seem to be stronger from this experience. It can be hoped that they will be better prepared for crisis situations of various natures, learn to better plan for them and know how to maintain the continuity of service in different circumstances (developing a set of good practices in dealing with a crisis common for various libraries should be the next task). It can be assumed that libraries will pay attention to their relations with employees, enabling more remote work, intensify digitization so that more collections are available online and strengthen the technical infrastructure (Breeding 2020).

Paradoxically, the pandemic and lockdown resulted in positive developments for the university as well. In May and June 2020, the University Library in Warsaw became involved in the preparation of an application to the EU Horizon 2020 competition "Science with and for society" along with other universities associated in the 4EU + Alliance (which include also Charles University in Prague, the University of Heidelberg, Sorbonne University, the University of Copenhagen and the University of Milan)[11]. The difficult situation in which the application was prepared did not interfere with the work: on the contrary, it gave it more urgency even though the project team met only online. The project includes, among other things, activities related to open access, its implementation and promotion. The circumstances influenced the argumentation of the application in these areas. These days no one needs to be convinced of the value of open resources and open science, but in the present situation their value seems even greater. At the end of July it was announced that the application was positively assessed and that the project TRAIN4EU + ("Transforming ReseArch & INnovation agendas and support in 4EU") has received funding, which will enable the development of research and support for innovation for the universities of the 4EU + Alliance.

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[11] http://4euplus.eu/4EU-1.html

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