ESCAPING THE IVORY TOWER: BUILDING PUBLIC-ACADEMIC LIBRARY CONNECTIONS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has seemingly ushered in a new era of dangerous misinformation, spread rampantly across the Internet and facilitated by social media. In the interest of inoculating members of the public against this misinformation, and in building up their community outreach efforts, Athabasca University (AU) Librarians partnered with their local public library to deliver a series of media-literacy webinars open to the public and the university community. These media literacy sessions offered by AU Library and the Alice B. Donahue Library and Archives were successful in engaging those who attended and have strengthened the connection between public and academic library staff in the town of Athabasca, Alberta, Canada.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The value of collaboration within the library context cannot be overstated. Saunders and Corning (2020) point out that the “importance of collaboration in the LIS profession is underscored by the extent to which it appears in professional standards and documents” (p. 454) and note that collaboration is specifically highlighted in competency standards from a variety of professional associations. A great deal of literature is available that addresses the need for academic libraries to engage in collaborative projects both internally and externally to their home institution.

Atkinson (2018) provides a thorough review of the literature pertaining specifically to academic libraries and collaboration, exploring the myriad stakeholders both internal and external to the academic library that may benefit from such partnerships. There is considerable material available on the topic of collaboration between academic and public libraries specifically. Case studies abound, highlighting the wide range of activities that constitute academic / public library collaborations. Major topics in the literature include: library consortia, in which access to electronic resources is shared (Horton, 2013); joint-use libraries, in which academic and public libraries share the same physical facilities and coordinate programming (Allen, Downes, & Keene, 2018; Cisse, 2013; Jordan, Lawrence, & Moran, 2018; Sarjeant-Jenkins & Walker, 2015); and community partnerships between academic and public libraries, in which programming efforts are shared, but physical facilities and electronic resources are not (Halverson, & Plotas, 2006; Laddusaw & Wilhelm, 2018; Palmer & Peterson, 2007; Richards, 2017; Rust 2018; Saenz, 2020).

Despite the variety of forms that academic / public library collaborations take, the motives and values underpinning these efforts remain consistent. A common theme in the literature is that academic / public library collaborations allow libraries to preserve resources and programming in times of budgetary crisis (Allen, Downes, & Keene, 2018; Saenz, 2020; Saunders & Corning, 2020). Sarjeant-Jenkins and Walker (2014) point out that academic / public library partnerships "are also valuable for raising awareness of the libraries and their programs and services, leading to increased membership, increased use, and larger audiences for programs" (p. 449). Academic librarians can leverage relationships with public librarians in community outreach efforts; public librarians “are often expert at community programming and bring with them their wealth of day-to-day experiences of connecting users with both cultural and library events in the most efficient and cost-productive manner” (Palmer & Peterson, 2007, p. 56). Laddusaw and Wilhelm (2018) even argue that such collaborations can result in economic benefits for the community at large, as the “materials
offered freely at public libraries assist in increasing a community’s education and knowledge, which in turn promotes economic
growth and productivity” (p. 34)

Library collaboration as a means of fostering information literacy and lifelong learning was also an important thematic
thread. Academic / public library collaborations encourage students of higher educational institutions to build connections to public
libraries that can provide graduates with access to resources that they will lose post-graduation (Richards, 2017). Palmer and Peterson
(2007) note that:

The promotion of literacy is core to the mission of public and academic libraries. Outreach programs can be an effective
way to accomplish this goal. Creative events and marketing materials targeted to the community the library serves inspire
library patrons to visit the library, explore its resources, and appreciate the pleasures of lifelong learning. (p. 52)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for academic and public librarians to collaborate on education campaigns became
more urgent as misinformation spread online and elsewhere constituted a major risk to populations being served. The “novelty and
rapid spread of the virus have added a new urgency to the availability and distribution of reliable information to help curb its fatal
potential as long-term remedies remain under development” (Lor, Wiles, & Britz, 2021, p.1). Bonnet and Sellers (2019); Lor, Wiles,
and Britz (2021); and Lovelace, Thomas, and Harper (2020) address these concerns.

BACKGROUND

Athabasca University (AU), an online institution, is headquartered in the town of Athabasca, Alberta, Canada, home to a
population of 3000. Campus buildings are situated at the top of a large hill and are mainly accessed by car commuters as no public
transit options to the site are available. Learners and residents rarely visit the physical campus; some science lab components are
completed by students on site, and AU’s annual convocation ceremony is usually held there. AU Library’s physical space holds a
collection of print books as well as workspaces. While open to both learners enrolled in courses and to the local community, AU
Library rarely sees in-person visitors. AU's Strategic Plan states: “From its home in the town of Athabasca, our University shapes
and enables mutually supportive communities, regardless of where those communities exist” (Athabasca University, 2018); the
under-use of the physical library facilities and resources by community members is a gap AU Librarians and staff strive to
address in order to meet this broader goal of community support. AU Library has also included outreach to the local community in
its own draft strategic plan (unpublished and yet to be finalized) for, as Owens and Bishop (2018) illustrate, another way “to get buy-
in [for your outreach initiatives] is to work your initiatives into the library’s strategic plan” (p. 79).

As the literature suggests, public / academic library collaborations not only break down the barriers for the public to use the
resources of the academic library, but also provide academic library users with connections to public library offerings. As Richards
notes (2017): “For the overwhelming majority of college students, the public library will be their source for quality resources after
graduation and for a lifetime of learning” (p. 135). In an article by Dixon (2018), Daniel Dotson recommends that we “use each other
to get access to what you need. Academic librarians know their campus and have a good feel for whom to contact for various things.
Public Libraries are in touch with the community” (p. 24).

AU Librarians had been planning a program of outreach to the local community which would have included book clubs at
the AU Library, as well as information literacy instruction sessions offered to the local high school, public libraries, and community
groups. These plans were set aside as the COVID-19 pandemic forced closure of AU’s physical spaces in March 2020, and most of
the Librarians and staff moved to working from home. As the pandemic continued with no end in sight, AU Librarians decided not
to wait.

Misinformation spread through the Internet and elsewhere is not a new phenomenon. In particular, “social media platforms
have become primary vehicles for news delivery; therefore, it is vital to understand how such platforms operate, such as the use of
algorithms, to comprehend the user’s ability to critically evaluate the received information” (LaPierre & Kitzie, 2019, p. 429). The
COVID-19 pandemic has made this issue more urgent than ever, and it seemed to AU Librarians a vital time to reach out to the local
public library to deliver virtual media literacy sessions to the Athabasca community to both learn more about how social media
platforms work, and to inform community members about social media and misinformation. AU Librarians reworked a media
literacy session for students that they had used in the past into a public session in partnership with the town of Athabasca’s Alice B.
Donahue Library & Archives. This facility is located centrally in the town of Athabasca, and maintains a collection of print
materials, DVDs, access to subscription reference materials, and computers for in-person visits. Public programming includes story
time for children, but very little adult programming was then on offer. AU Librarians and the Program Coordinator for Alice B.
Donahue reasoned that an adult programming project represented a great opportunity for both libraries to expand their community
outreach efforts. AU Library runs on a “culture of yes” (Owens & Bishop, 2018), and outreach plans were supported and encouraged
by the University Librarian.
Planning

AU Librarians approached the Program Coordinator at Alice B. Donahue, to find out if providing public library patrons with media literacy sessions targeted at adults would be beneficial. Initially the idea was to offer the sessions in person at the public library, with available child programming simultaneously to allow parents time to participate in the media literacy session. These in-person sessions were no longer possible as the COVID-19 pandemic persisted. As the pandemic progressed and the spread of misinformation became rampant online, AU decided to rework their first session with topical 2020 examples of how to evaluate information found online. The second session, held six months later, focused specifically on Facebook’s role in spreading misinformation, and provided learners with tips on how to evaluate information found there.

Workshop Structure

These sessions were open to the public and to the university community, and were promoted through both libraries’ web pages, social media, and email networks. The first session was held on Adobe Connect, the software that AU used at that time to deliver online presentations. The second session was held on Zoom, as this tool is the software used by Alice B. Donahue Library and, Librarians saw it as more user-friendly than Adobe Connect or Microsoft Teams (which AU had since switched to using). Presented by AU Librarians and Alice B. Donahue Library & Archives Program Coordinators, all hosts were available to respond to questions and both libraries were able to publicize their programs, resources, and services during the sessions. AU Librarians worked to incorporate many active learning elements into these two online sessions in order to best engage attendees. Halpern et al. (2002) describe how active learning allows learners to “solve problems and discover the consequences of their actions—through reflecting on past and immediate experiences—they construct their own understanding” (p. 1463). The sessions were titled: 1) You Can’t Get a Degree from Google University: Critically Evaluating Internet Sources, and 2) Facebook: Fact or Fiction? The Google University session was a two-hour workshop that set out seven criteria for evaluating online sources and used topical examples and polling to give attendees the chance to try out the evaluation criteria themselves. The Facebook session focused on evaluating news items seen on Facebook by teaching attendees how the Facebook algorithm works, and how to use lateral reading techniques to evaluate information that they see in their timelines. This session used live polling and user-generated word clouds with Poll Everywhere to engage attendees with the material. The Facebook session was forty-five minutes long because the librarians were concerned that the two-hour timeframe of the Google University session may have hampered attendance, and hoped that a shorter session would appeal more to an older audience and those with busier schedules.

DISCUSSION

The Google University session had 86 registrations, with 19 of these registrants attending the session. Even though it had a shorter time length, the Facebook session had 22 registrations, and only 9 attendees. There may have been a few reasons for this drop in both registration and attendance. The Facebook session was targeted at a smaller community, mainly senior citizens; Librarians had hoped to partner with the local senior’s centre to promote this webinar to their community. The Program Coordinator at Alice B. Donahue reached out to the senior’s centre to discuss presentation and promotion options but did not receive a response. Unfortunately, the date of the session also coincided with a considerable outbreak of COVID-19 in Athabasca County, with one in fifty community members becoming infected (CityNews Edmonton, 2020). This outbreak may have left community members distracted or otherwise unable to attend.

The Google University recording was posted online on AU Library’s website and YouTube channel in October 2020 and has had 78 views as of May 3, 2021. The Facebook session posted in April 2021 has had 31 views as of May 3, 2021. While the sessions did not have a huge turnout, those who attended the session were extremely engaged with the material, and there was significant discussion and questions afterwards. The survey was only completed by two attendees from the Facebook session and 14 from the Google University session, but the results were all positive. For example, all of the attendees who filled out the Google University survey felt that they came away from the workshop having learned a new skill. One attendee stated: “I am a new student in my 30's who has never learned these skills before. The internet has changed drastically since I was in school so this is very much appreciated!” The Facebook session, while having less participation in the survey, had positive results. One participant felt that coming away from the session they had gained the skill to articulate and teach others about Facebook news, stating: “No change to my understanding of Facebook, but 100% improved my ability to explain why my intuition has a concern with something I find.” The other participant felt that they now had the ability “to question sources and how to read and understand sources of information.”

Based on the assumption they were using controversial examples, presenters thought they might get some pushback from conspiracy theorists who did not agree with the material presented; however, this did not happen, and presenters did not have to monitor and manage controversial discussions. This left presenters feeling as though they were “preaching to the choir,” as, based on poll results, most attendees at the outset seemed to have a fairly strong scepticism towards online misinformation. This begs the
question of how we can engage with a wider audience and pull in those who might not actively choose to attend a media literacy workshop.

CONCLUSION

The media literacy sessions offered by AU Library and the Alice B. Donahue Library and Archives were successful in engaging those who attended and combatting misinformation. These webinars were valuable as an exercise in collaboration and provided helpful models for such outreach efforts going forward. Although these webinars reached a relatively small audience, there have been subsequent collaboration efforts with Alice B. Donahue Library and Archives, including a One Book Project. Further media literacy and collaboration between the libraries will continue, as will our attempts to reach out to additional community members and organizations. AU Librarians intend to continue their local outreach efforts both online and in-person when it is considered safe to do so.

REFERENCES


