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“WE’RE STILL OPEN” : CANADIAN NEWS MEDIA’S FRAMING OF CANADIAN PUBLIC LIBRARIES’ COVID- 19 RESPONSES (Paper)

Abstract:

COVID-19 is persistently transforming how and where public libraries are able to engage with and support their communities. While existing research at the juncture of public library services and COVID-19 has overwhelmingly examined library-produced content, this study shifts focus to media representations of library practices during COVID-19. Using frame analysis methodology, this study analyzed 218 Canadian news articles for the ways in which news stories articulate public libraries’ roles and resources during the COVID-19 pandemic. Three frames emerged: (re)negotiating the library’s space, (re)configuring the library’s roles, and (re)constructing “others”. Conclusions explore the implications of these frames, linked to a broader conversation regarding transformations to public spaces during COVID-19.

1. Introduction

With the uncertainties that accompany a number of emergency or disaster situations, public libraries often assume the role of emergency information centre; aided by the social trust that communities place in their public library (Jaeger et al., 2007). With physical distancing mandates, COVID-19 is uniquely and persistently transforming how and where public libraries are able to engage with and support their communities. While existing research at the juncture of public library services and COVID-19 has overwhelmingly examined library-produced content, this study instead utilized frame analysis methodology, analyzing Canadian print news media to explore how news stories are framing public libraries’ responses and engagement during COVID-19. In addition to outlining the frames present in the news stories ((re)Negotiating the library’s space, (re)Configuring the library’s roles, and (re)Constructing “others”), we discuss the utility of both the frame analysis methodology in LIS research as well as the importance of examining representations of public libraries in media.

2. Libraries in the time of COVID

A quickly growing body of research is carefully examining public libraries’ multifaceted and ever-changing roles as COVID-19 itself continues to evolve. Given the global impact of COVID on everyday life, including public library staff and patrons, existing research ranges from a global documentary analysis of international library and information associations’ statements on

COVID-19 (Kosciejew, 2020), to responses at specific geographic locales, including country-level analyses (Greece [Koulouris, Vraimaki & Koloniari, 2020] and the United States [Wang & Lund, 2020], state-level studies (Texas [Santos, 2020]), to specific public library systems' responses (the New York Public Library [Alajmi & Albudaiwi, 2020]).

Likely as a result of libraries' physical closures and related difficulties of conducting in-person research, a majority of these aforementioned articles take up and analyze library-produced content or statements from digital sources. Analyses of how New York City Public Library mobilized Twitter during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic (Alajmi & Albudaiwi, 2020) and Greek libraries' use of social media during early COVID-19-related lockdown (Koulouris, Vraimaki & Koloniari, 2020) both revealed a "business as usual approach". Alajmi and Albudaiwi (2020) reported that nearly 86% of NYC Public Library's 9,450 tweets focused on general library information (library service updates, recommendations for readings, event advertisements) with only 14.5% of analyzed tweets directly related to COVID-19. Whereas these authors hypothesize this approach is done to provide a sense of normalcy for patrons, with more than half of the 189 libraries surveyed in Koulouris, Vraimaki, and Koloniari's (2020) study reporting that they view sharing information about COVID-19 as being outside their duties, further studies might speak to library staff directly to better understand the impetus behind libraries' social media posts.

A majority of existing COVID-19 library-focused research analyzes library-created digital content. One exception includes Gibson et al.'s (2020) important, contextual work that highlights the racial and socio-economic inequities that COVID-19 has uncovered, including the vulnerabilities of "disabled and chronically ill, older, and BIPOC "frontline" workers (such as library workers who interface with the public)" (p. 8). This present study joins this work in accessing externally-produced content to explore how news institutions (and the public who access this media) come to frame public libraries' roles and resources during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Frame Analysis Methodology

To analyze the news media, we applied frame analysis methodology (Kitzinger, 2007). As news articles (and its writers) frame a particular view at a particular moment in time, frame analysis is particularly salient for examining and bringing to light what frames are presented or potentially omitted. Frames, in this methodology, are understood as systems of classification (Goffman, 1974) or maps (Gamson, 1992) that help identify representations of reality. As news reporters relay an event, their questions asked, words used, and narrative structure employed "select some aspect of a perceived reality and make [it] more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

In this study, we searched the following Canadian, news-focused databases: CPI.Q (Canadian Periodicals Index Quarterly), CBCA (Canadian Business & Current Affairs) Reference & Current Events, and Canadian Newsstream. We also conducted a more general search in ProQuest Recent Newspapers and EBSCO Discovery Service. In each of the databases, search terms were kept broad ("public librar*" and ("COVID-19" or "coronavirus")) to match the databases' search parameters and to ensure a robust sample from which to analyze. We searched

databases for English-language, Canadian news articles published between January 30, 2020 (the day the Director-General of the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern) to June 15, 2020 (when the search was conducted) that featured or discussed some aspect of COVID-19 and public libraries.

The initial search resulted in a total of 738 news articles, of which 520 were excluded. Articles were excluded when they were duplicate articles or when the article was out of scope. A final total of 218 articles were read and included for analysis. The analytic plan was developed collaboratively, and each author read all included articles numerous times. Several phases of analysis were conducted in parallel. Articles were first categorized descriptively, using open coding to identify and name key topics discussed across multiple articles. Each of these open codes came from the content of the articles themselves: key terms, metaphors used, images, narrative structure, and recurring claims and/or depictions. At this time, the broad themes uncovered concerned the unprecedented nature of the problem and the role of libraries negotiating the pandemic context. During the second phase, called the axial codification (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), the codes were listed and then reduced to a smaller number of significant codes. This restricted list was used to review the analyzed material once more and to re-order the codes. In the third phase, which occurred over time and iteratively in engaging with the data, more thematic codes were developed and applied, which extended to address how information was presented in the articles, including implicit meanings and tones of the articles and the language used, particular phrasing, and stylistic choices.

4. News Stories' Frames

In our analysis, we identified three frames: (re)negotiating the library's space, (re)configuring the library's roles, and (re)constructing "others". In the (re)negotiating the library's space frame, we report on the nearly 50 percent of news stories that highlighted the ways that libraries were expanding their digital offerings to maintain access to services and resources. News articles cited the ability to get a free/temporary library card via an online application, rather than having to get a physical card in-person; raising awareness about e-resources (numbers of titles, books, magazines, newspapers available); the addition of new e-book titles; increasing TV show/film streaming allowances from online platforms; virtual story-times and other programming. Underlying the informational tone about these digital services and resources is the plaintive refrain that libraries may be physically closed but are still open and operating, and in many cases offering more than ever. In the second frame, (re)configuring the library's roles, alongside the (involuntary) reconsideration of what a library is (and can be), if not an open physical space, came an awareness and renegotiation of the role of the library - both in a pandemic and beyond. Emphasizing that the role of the library goes well beyond the provision of material texts and media was a common refrain. Several articles itemized the affective impact of library closures, using language of loss, pain, and yearning for what the library represent(s). Finally, in the third frame, (re)constructing "others", seventy-nine news stories (36%) discussed new or changing library services, programs, or materials for a specific population or patron group. Three groups quickly and clearly emerged across the sample: older adults, children, and newcomers. Being explicitly labeled in these news articles, these three groups emerged as requiring or deserving services that might be different from other ("typical") library patrons. These three groups were "othered" from the general library patron population based on a number of factors, most often and most notably: lack of access to technology (older adults and newcomers), at risk of being or

becoming isolated (older adults), or needing to avoid boredom and supplement learning and playtime opportunities (children).

In addition to exploring the implications of the three frames identified in the analyzed news media and their impact on transformations to social infrastructures during COVID-19, conclusions reiterate the utility of the frame analysis methodology in LIS research as well as the importance of examining representations of public libraries in media.

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