



GOING VIRTUAL



Programs and
Insights from a
Time of Crisis

SARAH OSTMAN

ALA Public Programs Office



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INTRODUCTION

March 12, 2020, was a normal day, more or less. At ALA's headquarters in downtown Chicago, we were mask-free, at our desks, perhaps a little distracted by the news of this tiny virus that had been sweeping the world.

That day, a Thursday, was the first time I heard the phrase *social distancing*. It came from Jeffrey Lambert, assistant director of digital inclusion and workforce readiness at Queens Public Library and then chair of ALA's Public and Cultural Programs Advisory Committee. "We want to be reactive in a way that's science-informed," he said, "and since we are not the experts on pandemics, we are pulling in the experts wherever we can."

I had been learning a lot on the subject. Earlier I had e-mailed with an Italian librarian, Carlo Ghilli, head of cultural heritage library services at the Public Library of Empoli. He told me that shops, bars, and all of Tuscany were shuttered; Italian libraries, his included, had been closed for a week. Carlo sent me surreal pictures of an empty reading room and said his colleagues were offering storytelling by telephone and inviting famous Italian children's book writers to make video storytimes for Facebook. "Early in the outbreak we thought we could keep the library open by placing limits on how many people could enter at once," he said, "but we were eventually forced to close completely."

It all seemed unthinkable. Shops, bars, libraries—all of society—shutting down? How would we in the United States manage? What would we do?

We found out soon enough, with U.S. libraries following in Italian libraries' footsteps in the days and weeks that followed. The shutdown happened in waves. First, library workers dragged chairs into storage rooms to force visitors

to socially distance, powered down half or two-thirds of their computers and taped “do not use” signs to those monitors, and removed toys from children’s play areas. Then, programs were canceled and meeting rooms cordoned off. Eventually bold announcements started appearing on library home pages: “closed until further notice.” The closures were as widespread as they felt; 99 percent of libraries responding to an ALA poll—that included more than 3,800 public, school, college and university, and other library types in all 50 states—reported limiting access to their buildings.¹

It was scary and overwhelming, but at the same time a “we’re all in this together” ethos took hold across the profession. Librarian listservs and Facebook groups flooded with people—library workers, of course, but also teachers, authors, and others—sharing resources and ideas to educate, prepare, and empower communities. Programming librarians moved their efforts online, posting storytimes (and debating fair use exceptions—see the fair use text box in chapter 1) and amping up the use of their social media pages. Again, the data showed that the surge of online activity was immediate; 61 percent of public libraries reported expanding virtual programming in a March 2020 Public Library Association study, just days and weeks after COVID-19 closed their doors.²

Of course, the pandemic wasn’t the only thing on people’s minds. Protests and civil unrest over police brutality and racism, record unemployment, and raging wildfires all combined into what *Rolling Stone* called “2020: The Year of the Converging Crises.”³

In ALA’s Public Programs Office, we believe that good library programming makes communities stronger and more resilient by creating lifelong learners, fostering conversation, and forging connections. These things—for simplicity’s sake, we can boil them down to learning and talking—are especially important in the polarized political climate we live in, and exponentially more so during this national health crisis. To put it lightly, the challenge for libraries in 2020 was how to create good programming when it seemed impossible for people to make connections.

Spoiler alert: libraries did create good programming, even great programming. And they did it by thinking locally and being there for their communities, whether face-to-face or through a screen, one person at a time.

This is where this book picks up—with the creative, diverse, and thoughtful work that programming librarians did during the pandemic. In the following pages, we explore 90 programs and hear from the library workers who created them. Most of the programs we talk about were virtual, hosted online

via a videoconferencing platform, or posted to social media. But we also look at a handful of analog programs that were developed to serve communities using deliveries, take-home kits, window displays, and socially distanced interactions. I learned about these achievements in various ways—through individual videoconferences with library workers, e-mail exchanges, submissions to *Programming Librarian*, a website I run in ALA’s Public Programs Office, and responses to an online survey looking for notable virtual programs. I quote from these conversations and submissions throughout this book.



Be on the lookout for this icon to find the analog programs discussed throughout this book.

Let’s not sugarcoat it: in most cases, these changes have been neither easy nor fun. On May 12, Chelsea Price, director of the Meservey Public Library in Iowa, wrote about her anxiety in re-opening her library for *Programming Librarian*. “I’m willing to bet your education and training did not prepare you for this,” she wrote, adding, “the world is a Dumpster fire, and we are all just doing the best we can.”⁴

Even the technology has added a new burden. “It’s been exhausting, in many ways, to do this,” Janie Hermann, manager of adult programming at the Princeton Public Library in New Jersey, told me in October. “Every Crowdcast you do, you have to be prepared for things to go wrong with the tech at any time,” she says. “And then you have to be calm under pressure.” (Crowdcast is a live video platform preferred by many libraries and publishers, especially for large events.)

And we need to acknowledge right off the bat the inherent inequities of library’s virtual shift. The digital divide is real, and we see it. The fact that millions of Americans cannot access vital information when they need it most, like during COVID-19, is a massive concern and will no doubt be the subject of many books.

But a lot of heartwarming things happened, too. Here are just a few that I came across while writing this book:

- During the shutdown in Morenci, Michigan, people howled at the moon together from their homes on Facebook Live.
- Eighty library patrons in Lincolnshire, Illinois, toasted each other in a virtual beer tasting.
- A librarian in Nederland, Colorado, said he was hungry in a storytime so a patron brought him a sandwich.⁵

I hope you find inspiration in these pages. As always, my colleagues and I in the ALA Public Programs Office welcome your feedback; we invite you to reach out to tell us about programs that have been meaningful in your community. We can be reached at publicprograms@ala.org.

NOTES

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

The structure of this book is based on the mission statement of the ALA Public Programs Office: “to empower libraries to create vibrant hubs of learning, conversation and connection in communities of all types.”

I start by talking about library programs whose primary goal are *Learning*; then ones that spark *Conversation*; then those that create *Connection* in a time when connection can seem challenging, rare, and much needed.

Finally, I add a fourth category not explicitly stated in our Public Programs Office mission statement—programs meant mainly to *Entertain*—because I think we can all agree that laughter is pretty critical to wellbeing; it was especially critical in 2020 and libraries knew it. Admittedly, these categories get blurry, and most programs in this book can easily fit into two or three of them.

How did I land on this precise list of programs, you may be wondering? In June 2020, I posted a survey to Programming Librarian calling for submissions. “With COVID-19, many libraries were thrown into uncharted terrain when it came to programming,” the call-for-submission said. “And so—as libraries do—they quickly innovated, coming up with a vast array of virtual programs in a short time. Some were twists on old favorites while others were brand new concepts.” The survey was shared via social media, electronic mailing lists, e-newsletters, and word of mouth. More than 700 library workers submitted programs for consideration. I supplemented these submissions with unique programs that I heard about through contacts in the library field, colleagues, the Programming Librarian Facebook group, and article submissions to Programming Librarian.

In addition to the programs in this book, I cover best practices on various topics and indulge in Q&As with leaders from the field on topics such as measuring program impact, understanding copyright law, moderating virtual author talks, facilitating virtual conversations, and injecting personality into your social media presence.

LEARNING

In this section, we look at educational programs—teaching everything from fake news to fitness, wildflowers to witchcraft. Throughout the pandemic, libraries have persevered in their mission to create lifelong learners.

ART TALK TUESDAYS

San Anselmo Public Library
San Anselmo, California

San Anselmo Public Library's Art Talk Tuesday is a one-hour, docent-led program featuring popular exhibits currently or formerly on display at local museums, including the de Young Museum, Legion of Honor, and Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. Typically, the talk is held in Town Hall Council Chambers, but the pandemic brought the series online. In May 2020, a docent from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art presented on San Francisco art from the '50s to the '70s; in September, the series covered three California master painters. Other presentations have included "The Language of Flowers in Japanese Art" with the Asian Art Museum and "Last Supper in Pompeii" with the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. The recordings are archived on the library's YouTube page.

BILINGUAL KWENTUHAN**Daly City Public Library**

Daly City, California

Daly City, with a population of 106,000, is the largest city with a majority Asian population in the mainland United States. Fifty-seven percent of its residents identify as Asian American, and more than one-third of the total population is Filipino. Celina Tirona, library assistant and a person of Filipino heritage, called her program Bilingual Kwentuhan, using the Tagalog word for storytime. “It was so nice to share our first storytime for the Filipino community,” Tirona said. “The program has received more views than any of our other virtual programs, and the publisher is sending us books and bookmarks as thanks for the exposure.” Tirona pre-recorded the first *Kwentuhan* in June 2020 and posted it as a Facebook Premiere at the time of the event. Participants could watch and listen to Tagalog children’s songs and a reading of a Tagalog children’s book with its translation. Twenty people tuned in live that first time, and the recording has more than 8,000 views—making it the library’s most viewed virtual program. It is so popular that the library has continued to offer the program biweekly.

COMMUNITY COOKING WITH THE CO-OP: STARRING JAMAR**Coos Bay Public Library**

Coos Bay, Oregon

Coos Bay Public Library partnered with the outreach coordinator at Coos Head Food Co-op for a live cooking demo. People joined Jamar Ruff and reference librarian Paul Addis on Zoom while Ruff made chana aloo curry (chickpea curry with potato) from the co-op kitchen. When people registered, they received the Zoom link as well as a list of ingredients, so many attendees followed along in their own kitchens with their cameras running. While Ruff cooked and provided instructions, viewers commented in the chat box and Addis read the comments aloud. Ruff also used some solid cooking-show techniques, such as bringing items closer to the camera so viewers could see ingredients up close. “I had never done a program like this virtually, so my main challenge was preparing for the unknown . . . it was a little overwhelming

managing everything by myself,” Addis said. “But my community partner’s smile when all the participants left Zoom . . . that moment was priceless and made it all worthwhile.” The collaboration resulted in a new partnership, with monthly programs on the fourth Thursday of each month.

COOKING MATTERS POP-UP GROCERY STORE TOUR: ONLINE

Ellsworth Public Library

Ellsworth, Maine

Ellsworth Public Library partnered with a local community health nonprofit to present an online grocery store tour and to share tips about shopping healthy on a budget. Featuring a Maine SNAP-Ed nutrition educator, the one-hour presentation covered how to use the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s MyPlate app as a shopping guide, buy fruit and vegetables on a budget, compare unit pricing, and read nutrition labels. The presenters started the hour by inviting participants to write in the chat to introduce themselves and share why they had signed up for the program. “This accomplished two goals—by learning why they signed up for the program, [the presenter] was able to tailor the information to fit their interests, and it was also a good check to make sure that everyone knew how to access and use the chat,” said community engagement librarian Abby Morrow.

COVID-19 MISINFORMATION CHALLENGE

Raymond H. Fogler Library, University of Maine

Orono, Maine

Does the World Health Organization recommend injecting disinfectant to treat COVID-19? Can the virus flourish in rolls of toilet paper? In the early days of the pandemic, the internet was rife with misinformation. The University of Maine’s Raymond H. Fogler Library used it as an opportunity to teach people around the world to discern fact from fiction. For five days in May 2020, people who registered received an e-mail quiz designed to test their knowledge while having fun and learning something new. The Google Form quizzes asked people to evaluate the validity of memes, doctors, news

headlines, treatments, and some of the science behind the virus. After completing the quiz, individuals received scores and links to resources. More than 500 people signed up for the e-mails, including university faculty, staff, and students, as well as librarians, parents, and others from across the United States, Canada, Hungary, the Netherlands, Jordan, and China. “We received myriad, unsolicited responses from enthusiastic participants who wanted to share their experience with each day’s challenge,” said social sciences and humanities librarian Jen Bonnet. “We heard from parents taking the challenge with children, partners and spouses comparing notes and scores, and teachers sharing the challenge with their students. Some even said they didn’t want the challenge to end.”

If you want to take or view the quizzes, they are available from the library’s LibGuide (<https://libguides.library.umaine.edu/covid19>).

CREATIVITY CRATES FOR SUMMER READING



Bath County Memorial Library Owingsville, Kentucky

Holly Howard, the assistant director of outreach and programming at Bath County Memorial Library, calls the Reading Creativity Crate program “the socially distanced solution to our summer reading program.” “Many of our patrons love and rely on summer reading so we knew we had to make it work,” Howard says. Library staff created five age-level crates for patrons to choose from: pre-K, grades 1–4, grades 5–8, grades 9–12, and adult. Staff started by sharing test crates with some of their own children. “The kids told us what they liked and didn’t like about the crates, including their thoughts on the overall presentation,” Howard says. The final crates each included two books, supplies for two crafts, supplemental resources for additional crafts, and a brochure recommending similar books. Patrons could pick up new boxes every two weeks or library staff would deliver them to homes.

CRICUT STICKER MAKING

Monroe Township Library

Monroe Township, New Jersey

When teen services librarian Emily Mazzoni's library closed to the public, it seemed a shame to let their \$350 Cricut Maker sit unused in the library makerspace. So with her director's permission, she brought the printer-sized cutting machine home for a virtual program with a mail component. Mazzoni used screen share to demonstrate the Design Space app, where teens learned how to create vinyl stickers. Mazzoni then printed them out while the teens watched. "There was an added element of fun because while I peeled back the stickers, they guessed which one was which," she said. Mazzoni mailed the stickers to the teens' homes. "They loved that because they don't really get fun physical mail," she said. Mazzoni later offered a similar program using iron-on transfers, where she showed the teens how to iron on the decals once they arrived in the mail.

DREAM CAREERS: VIRUS HUNTERS

King County Library System

King County, Washington

Dream Careers is a teen-initiated, teen-led series designed to increase awareness on a variety of career choices. The program helps teens research career paths while speaking with a chosen guest. The kickoff event featured virologist Dr. Ken Stedman, a professor in Portland State University's biology department. Dr. Stedman studies viruses found in extreme environments, such as in volcanic hot springs, and the teens wanted to hear from him in light of the pandemic. The teens decided to structure the program like an informational interview and planned the questions in advance. "Our teen volunteers took turns asking Dr. Stedman questions, and we had time for other participants to ask questions on camera and in the chat box," said teen services librarian Catherine Schaeffer. Topics included the typical workday of a virologist, the equipment he uses, and the protective gear he wears while in the lab.

Marketing Virtual Programs

When Marianne Stoess's organization first moved its programming online in response to the pandemic, she was inspired by the possibilities: "Literally the whole world is your audience. Anybody could come," says Stoess, assistant director of marketing and public relations for Kentucky Humanities.

Over time, she saw how this could also be a drawback: your audience could also *attend* programs literally anywhere. "Before, we were competing with events in our city on that day," Stoess says. "The whole world is our competition now."

With so many virtual events available, marketing your library's programs can feel like a daunting task, but it doesn't have to be. If you aren't getting the turnout you want, try following these six tips:

1. **Clearly specify when events are virtual.** It might be obvious to you whether a program is in-person or virtual, but that's not always the case for people who come across your website or click through one of your newsletter links. Make sure the distinction is clear. "Our website still uses the same event calendar for virtual programs, but I started adding a 'Virtual' marker at the start of each title to make it clear we were not meeting in person," says Chelsea Paige, social media/emerging technology librarian at the Nesmith Library in New Hampshire.
2. **Don't underestimate word of mouth.** With so many online events to choose from, people are going to be drawn to those that are recommended by people they trust. Ask your Friends groups, trustees, or regulars to spread the word. As Stoess suggests, "people who are feeling virtual fatigue might be more inclined to log in to an event if they hear it directly from a friend."
3. **Partner.** It is not cheating to share the program workload with another library or organization. In *Ask, Listen, Empower: Grounding Your Library Work in Community Engagement*, Cindy Fesemyer explains "you need to know yourself to know what kind of partner you need. Looking at the things you do well is a good start." If your library's strength is not marketing, look to partner with groups that have strong followings, and you can bring your other strengths (whether that be technology, staff, or something else) to the table.
4. **Ask people what they want.** A Google Form or SurveyMonkey questionnaire—the shorter, the better—can be a quick way to gauge interest or poll your community to find out if you're hitting your marks. "We surveyed our adult patrons to learn what type of virtual programming they would watch on social media," says



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