

GLAM Collaborations under COVID-19 Conditions and Beyond

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As COVID-19 disrupts the world, and memory institutions respond, there is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reflect on the strength of collaboration among galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAMs) and to accelerate shared goals to advance research, learning, and human understanding. There is much to build on locally, nationally, and internationally. There are a plethora of local collaborations within and across institutions. Nationally associations bring the community together, and initiatives such as the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation’s support to enhance collaboration among campus libraries and museums¹ encourage increased use of library and museum resources in research and teaching. A research partnership between OCLC, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), and Battelle—the

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REopening Archives, Libraries, and Museums (REALM) project²—aims to inform decisions regarding the handling of core museum, library, and archival materials as a result of COVID-19. Internationally the OpenGLAM community³ is

focused on open access and copyright. Even with temporarily disrupted events, such as the Library of Congress–sponsored “Connecting Collections as Data: Transforming Communities, Sharing Knowledge, and Building Networks with International GLAM Labs,”⁴ active consultations among memory institutions experts and leaders around the world are informing COVID-19 choices.

Now more than ever, it is critical to decide what is most strategically important to act on together to shape the future. The potential to leap forward is real. In late May, I interviewed Mark Sweeney, principal

deputy librarian of the Library of Congress; Jacob Nadal, director for preservation at the Library of Congress; Kurt Graham, director of the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, US National Archives and Records Administration; and Trevor A. Dawes, vice provost for Libraries and Museums and May Morris University Librarian at the University of Delaware. We discussed GLAM collaborations under COVID-19 and what these conditions might offer as opportunities for the future. This article reflects our conversations.

Collaborations among the museums, libraries, and archives discussed in the interviews take many forms: internal collaborations, collaborations among institutional partners, individual leader and expert collaborations, collaborations with community organizations, collaborations with partners in research and learning, and collaborations with “the people.” In all of these the central theme is to share information with and among scholars, students, citizen scholars, and the general public.

Collaboration under COVID-19 Conditions

Collaborations are not new among the GLAM community. Although they are unique, individual disciplines, archives, museums, and libraries share a common mission—to provide people with information that they can use to learn, to conduct research, and to contribute to society. They interact through shared collections and access to collections, shared expertise, and shared events and exhibits. They capture and reflect human history and steward it throughout time. So, how have collaborations changed in the face of the global pandemic and subsequent societal challenges?

The Library of Congress *Strategic Plan* for 2019–2023⁵ highlights the significance of internal and external collaborations, with federal peers, nationally and internationally. With COVID-19 there has been even more opportunity for progress on the web archiving program⁶ in collaboration with the International Internet Preservation Consortium. The Library of Congress is in regular contact with the Smithsonian

and the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) as the three jurisdictions share many similarities and operate under US federal rules. For these entities, COVID-19 has reinforced the importance of a trustworthy network of peers. The Library of Congress has weekly calls with colleagues in the US and around the globe to share knowledge. For example, talking with experts in Australia and New Zealand led to a better understanding of the effects of weather on COVID-19.

COVID-19 has highlighted the urgency and the very human impact of shared knowledge among a broad set of stakeholders—whether that knowledge is related to safe practices for reopening buildings and providing access to physical materials, or ensuring trustworthy information is available when it is so crucial that myths be dispelled by facts. Academic and public GLAM organizations are in the process of planning for and even reopening portions of their buildings and services. One of the primary concerns for staff and users is the safe handling of physical materials. Over the next few months the REALM collaboration will provide scientific data to inform decisions about high-circulating items, and special museum and research library collections. The project provides for a shared understanding of the science, as well as collective knowledge in how to handle the materials in operational workflows. Imagine how even one user community—such as those who count on the National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled that circulates 20 million items a year from the Library of Congress collections alone—depends on a **safe** means for reading pleasure as well as learning and research. Now multiply this by the hundreds of thousands of GLAM organizations serving people around the world.

At a time when people need more reliable and trustworthy information, research libraries and museums such as the University of Delaware have quickly pivoted with their partners to provide their shared community with virtual services, such as serving the small business community as they seek to understand how best to address the economic challenges they are facing or providing access for students and scholars through digital collections. Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to

presidential libraries, research materials requests, and reference requests are being met as much as digital access allows. Catalogers who may have been working with physical materials are now focused on electronic records and e-books. Staff are developing new research guides and web archives. New digital collections have been launched (seven at the Library of Congress), with the potential for providing even more opportunities for collaboration among the GLAM community. As Kurt Graham stated in our interview, “Anytime we digitize a collection or make it accessible through technology, it is an act of collaboration—collaboration with anyone who wants to use that information. That is the future—seeing digitization as an act of collaboration rather than an act of service. By sharing knowledge in the public sphere, we create a market of ideas and of information which in term facilitates all kinds of collaborations.”

With a long history of GLAM collaboration, institutions such as the University of Delaware’s Library and Museums already have strong community relationships. Together they play an important role in grounding truth from rumor and providing a source of information during turmoil—such as helping small businesses deal with the economic depression. In maintaining partnership commitments, GLAM leaders also count on each other—they check in, touch base, and remind each other that “we are here—we care—we’re in this together,” as Trevor Dawes said in our interview.

As stewards of human (and machine) knowledge, GLAM communities are living and documenting the pandemic and its impact on our society. Just type “documenting COVID-19” into your browser and you will get over 445,000,000 hits. These range from the Smithsonian and other museums collecting COVID-19 artifacts, to local newspapers, historical societies, and university libraries collecting oral histories. Having not read all of the hits, there may be other themes. Nevertheless, a lot of work will remain to make sense of what we learn.

GLAM Collaborations beyond COVID-19

With so much of our lives upended, this is a time to choose what to accelerate in pursuit of the shared mission, and what to stop. All of the interviewees see the potential for significant opportunities while acknowledging significant challenges.

Now there is an opportunity to accelerate the ways in which the GLAM community helps people discover the myriad materials available to them from GLAM institutions—particularly in terms of integrating the collections intellectually in ways that engage the intended audiences. This will also highlight GLAMs’ role as trusted stewards of information. The synergies are multiple. The collections serve as rich resources of research materials for scholars. As part of a curated experience (online or in person), the collections are packaged as a powerful narrative presented in a digestible way for general audiences—and as an inspiration for future scholars. By working with faculty together, GLAMs engage them in finding complementary collections, and in teaching students with all types of materials represented in the shared collections. GLAM institutions reinforce the inherent human story in their collective knowledge assets.

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By increasing digital access to collections, together the GLAM community has an opportunity **beyond** providing a service. Digitization becomes another path to collaboration and to human insight. With an emphasis on digital access, even more collections are likely to be digitized and more electronic records made available. Partnerships among the GLAM community and with the public create trust and inspire engagement. Examples of such partnerships include the Library of Congress crowdsourced transcriptions projects,⁷ NARA’s citizen archivists,⁸ and the role of University of Delaware as a hub

for the Digital Public Library of America. Even more than before, the public may be an integral part of GLAM collaborations.

Joining up the knowledge assets to increase ease of use is essential and challenging. This may be a moment in time for a breakthrough in barrier-free information discovery. Certainly Mark Sweeney believes this moment provides that potential. The Library of Congress is trying to move the community from the MARC standard to the linked-data world using BIBFRAME.⁹ Most recently the library has been able to “complete the circle”—MARC records can be converted to BIBFRAME records and now BIBFRAME records can be converted to MARC records—by working with its partners in the larger BIBFRAME set of projects. This allows libraries to leverage the power of linked open data for their collections and also to continue to leverage their investment in integrated library systems. This makes it possible to live in a hybrid world using open source code. Still excited about the opening of the new museum in the fall of 2020, the Truman Presidential Library and Museum has discussed creating online companions to physical exhibitions. They, like the GLAM community itself, recognize that the physical and digital experience reinforce the full mission of the institution.

The future has yet to be written. The balance of our physical proximity and the virtual world is yet to be defined. The job descriptions for collaborating in a changed world do not exist today. Nevertheless, it is certain that the opportunity rests with people. It is up to us to attract talented individuals, and to inspire the next generation of leaders to build the future in collaboration with others. As Trevor Dawes stated, “Irrespective of our role or the time, the creation and maintenance of these relationships is what makes us successful.”

Endnotes

1. One example of the Mellon Foundation’s support for library-museum collaboration is explored in Jill Deupi, Charles Eckman, and Christina Larson, “C-R-E-A-T-E: Building an Institutional Cultural Resources

Platform,” *Research Library Issues*, no. 300 (2020): 18–31, <https://doi.org/10.29242/rli.300.3>.

2. REALM project website, accessed June 4, 2020, <https://www.webjunction.org/explore-topics/COVID-19-research-project.html>.
3. OpenGLAM website, accessed June 4, 2020, <https://openglam.org/>.
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5. “Strategic Plan,” Library of Congress website, accessed June 4, 2020, <https://www.loc.gov/strategic-plan/>.
6. “Web Archiving: About This Program,” Library of Congress website, accessed June 4, 2020, <https://www.loc.gov/programs/web-archiving/about-this-program/>.
7. “By the People,” Library of Congress website, accessed June 4, 2020, <https://crowd.loc.gov/>.
8. “Citizen Archivist Missions,” US National Archives and Records Administration website, accessed June 4, 2020, <https://www.archives.gov/citizen-archivist/missions>.
9. “Bibliographic Framework Initiative,” Library of Congress website, accessed June 4, 2020, <https://www.loc.gov/bibframe/>.

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To cite this article: Mary Lee Kennedy. “GLAM Collaborations under COVID-19 Conditions and Beyond.” *Research Library Issues*, no. 300 (2020): 32–38. <https://doi.org/10.29242/rli.300.4>.