Florence G. Sloan. Special Collections Practice in Response to the Challenges of COVID-19: Problems, Opportunities, and Future Implications for Digital Collections at the Louis Round Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. A Master's Paper for the M.S. in L.S degree. April, 2021. 24 pages. Advisor: Denise Anthony

This qualitative assessment of interviews with staff of the Louis Round Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill seeks to illuminate the effect of COVID-19 on the functions of the library, the impact on how staff view their work, and potential future implications. Specifically, this study asks questions about the accessibility and user experience of archival collections during COVID-19.

Headings:

Access to archives

Archival processing

Digitization of archival materials

University & college archives

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS PRACTICE IN RESPONSE TO THE CHALLENGES OF
COVID-19: PROBLEMS, OPPORTUNITIES, AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS FOR
DIGITAL COLLECTIONS AT THE LOUIS ROUND WILSON LIBRARY AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL

by
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A Master's paper proposal submitted to the faculty
of the School of Information and Library Science
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Library Science.

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Approved by

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Denise Anthony

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Introduction

In mid-March, 2020, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill shut down its campus in response to COVID-19 and switched to fully remote instruction on March 23, 2020, after an extended spring break. Instructors were asked to recreate and adapt their courses under very short notice as COVID-19 suddenly took over every facet of our lives. In response, the university libraries were asked to update their services remotely in response to rapid changes in the safety needs of the library staff and the user needs of the UNC campus and researchers around the world. This master's paper seeks to document the case of the Louis Round Wilson Library as a special collections library situated in the context of a large public university's library network in the southeastern United States. This case study is intended to be a individual case which other case studies may be compared with, or may be analyzed by future researchers to see how closely the case study of Wilson Library followed larger regional, national, or global trends in the delivery and innovation of library services during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kosciejew, 2020).

Literature Review

The creation of archival digital collections has been happening for decades, and the importance of digitization work is well established, especially for improving the traditional archives services of preservation and research accessibility (Conway, 2015). Digital collections of archival materials are a subset of digital libraries, which are "often defined broadly to include many types of online resources such as e-journals, digitized cultural heritage materials, institutional repositories, and even library Web sites" (Kelly, 2014). For the purposes of this paper, "digital collections" refers to digitized cultural heritage materials in archives. However, it should be noted that even "digitized cultural heritage materials" can be a very broad term given that it can apply to manuscripts, books, photographs, audiovisual materials, and more.

DIGITAL COLLECTIONS: CHARACTERISTICS AND ASSESSMENT

Digital collections differ from physical archival materials in many respects, which differentiates both their use and assessment from that of physical archival materials. The most immediate distinction between the two is the rendering of the original source as a digital object that is freely accessible within the limitations of Internet access and legal permissions (Conway, 2015). The second, and less obvious, distinction is that digital collections require significantly more care in their creation and preservation. Paul Conway explains that digitization equipment and labor is expensive. Furthermore, from

the beginnings of the creation of digital collections, digital preservation and migration across digital platforms has been recognized to be risky and expensive (Tibbo, 2003).

There is a voluminous amount of digital archival collections on the internet in 2020—by now, it is expected that an institution with the resources and technical expertise to do so will likely have digital collections of some kind. However, because digital collections cost time and money to create and maintain, especially with the unique challenges of digital preservation as they arise with the evolution of technology, institutional stakeholders have an interest in knowing how their digital collections are being used. Therefore, assessments of the value of digital collections services are pivotal for justifying the funding for their creation and continued existence (Kelly, 2014).

Assessments of digital collections differ from assessments of physical archives spaces in significant ways. An assessment of physical archives might look at the use of space for storage and best practices for the preservation of physical objects while mitigating environmental risks in the event of flood or fire, as well as collections development (*Documentary Heritage & Preservation Services for New York: Planning & Assessment*, n.d.). However, Elizabeth Kelly's review of assessments for digital collections prior to 2014 has found that these include usability, user studies, and Web analytics studies through qualitative and quantitative methods (Kelly, 2014). Since then, assessment topics for digital archives include frameworks for digital preservation, retrieval bias in web archive searches, the degree to which websites can be archived, and case studies (Banos & Manolopoulos, 2016; Maemura et al., 2017; Samar et al., 2018). One of these digital collection assessment case studies, from Ohio State University,

observes that creating and managing digital collections continues to be

challenging work. Furthermore, because establishing systematic assessment of the

workflows and policies guiding digital collections is an even more complex task, the

assessment of digital collections has yet to become a core component of digital

collections management (Perrin Joy M. et al., 2017; Shaw, 2016).

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES

As with many societal institutions, COVID-19 has forced libraries and archives to

transfer most if not all their services to a remote model. For archives, this means that

users are more reliant on digital collections than they were before COVID-19. Previously,

searching digital collections may have been more convenient than making a trip to the

reading room, but now it is a necessity. Anna Maria Tammaro's article about the impact

of COVID-19 on Italian libraries chronicles the experiences of one of the first COVID-19

hotspots in 2020, asking the question that will likely be the focus of many studies on

COVID-19 and libraries: what are the future implications of COVID-19 for libraries?

(Tammaro, 2020). She touches on several topics that have also been written on by

librarians in the United States, such as budgeting for economic fallout of COVID-19,

how to sanitize collections for libraries that resume some level of in-person work, and the

accelerated delivery of digital services (Enis, 2020; Ewen, n.d.; Machovec, 2020; Peet,

Lisa, 2020).

The review of this literature reveals that the assessment of digital collections has

yet to be brought to the forefront of archival practice despite digital collections receiving

extra use and attention out of necessity because of COVID-19. Furthermore, with the rise

of COVID, there has been limited opportunity for library and archives staff to

assess their services because circumstances have necessitated a focus on the delivery of

remote services during a historic pandemic. The purpose of this paper is to attempt to

bridge this lack of assessment by analyzing, through qualitative measures, how the

circumstances created by COVID-19 have shaped the functions of Wilson Library,

particularly in terms of accessibility and user experience, and any potential implications

for future creation and management of digital collections directly influenced by the

events of COVID-19.

Research Questions

This study does not aim to be a comprehensive assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on digital collections, but rather an inquiry into how the circumstances created by COVID-19 have changed the functions of Wilson Library, and the way staff view digital collections at Wilson Library, specifically in terms of accessibility and user experience. This study also seeks to understand if any of the changes brought on by COVID-19 could become a permanent part of the archival approach to creating and managing digital collections.

Methodology

The purpose of this phenomenological case study is to explore the effect of COVID-19 and Wilson Library's ensuing work from home projects on the ways in which library staff create and manage digital collections at Wilson Library. Specifically, the study seeks to investigate the changes made to accessibility and user experience of digital collections because of COVID-19, and if any of the changes in the library's function related to COVID-19 may be permanent. A qualitative study composed of semi-structured interviews was selected because individual perspectives best illustrate the "why" component of how these changes were developed and implemented in addition to the "what." As demonstrated in the literature review, the responses of libraries and archives to COVID-19 are not standardized as each institution has been required to make quick decisions about how to best serve the safety and informational needs of their staff and users according to the unique situation of each institution. Therefore, semi-structured interviews are the best qualitative method for understanding an individual institution's unique response to a historic pandemic (Ahlin, 2019).

Positionality / Researcher Role

As a library science and archives student who formerly worked at Wilson Library as a student assistant in the Digital Production Center, I recognize that I possess some "insider" knowledge of Wilson Library's digital workflow before and during the start of Wilson Library's response to COVID-19 in the 2019-2020 academic year. However, I

also recognize that my "insider" knowledge does not encompass the entirety of Wilson Library's many functions, and that as a student I have much to learn from the opportunity to interview library staff about their knowledge and experiences and this situates me "outside" the organization. As a historian by training, I also recognize that by conducting semi-structured interviews for a case study, I am incorporating the role of the historian by seeking to document the story of how a special collections library sought to continue its mission to make its materials available during a historic global pandemic. So although this is not an oral history project, the information collected in these interviews might come to be considered a form of oral history (Faulkenbury, 2020).

Sample / Research Participants

The qualifications for interviewees for this study are that the individual is a permanent staff member of Wilson Library (this intentionally excludes temporary student workers who may have been furloughed because of COVID-19 budget cuts) and their work before COVID-19 was related to digital collections or their work became related to digital collections because of COVID-19. Through convenience sampling, I used my personal connections at Wilson Library to find participants, but I also reached out to library staff formally. When appropriate, I will ask my personal connections at Wilson Library and my advisor to facilitate introductions with other staff. The target number of participants was 3-6.

Data Collection Methods

The interviews for this study were conducted via Zoom, the video conferencing service many universities have come to depend on during COVID-19. The challenges of

data collection are difficult to anticipate during COVID-19, but technology and internet connectivity issues, household interruptions of Zoom calls, and the constraints of personal availability are likely to be familiar culprits. Human error in recollection is also a drawback of interviews, but the benefits of individual insight outweigh the risk of human error.

Participants were gathered through convenience sampling and had the option that their responses be anonymized. I coordinated with participants to set up the interviews after they agreed to participate. The interviews began with introductory questions about what the participant's work was like before COVID-19, and transition into what their work is like during COVID-19 and how they see the impact of COVID-19 on the functions of Wilson Library. I reached out to staff at Wilson Library through personal and formal requests in April of 2021. It was difficult to anticipate the amount of time required for data collection because UNC's spring semester plans were undecided during the fall of 2020 and unexpected developments with COVID-19 could affect participants' personal availability. However, I finished with interviews by the end of April to allow enough time to write an analysis. For specific questions to help guide the semi-structured interviews, I consulted "Semi-Structured Interviews with Expert Practitioners: Their Validity and Significant Contribution to Translational Research" and "Anonymising Interview Data: Challenges and Compromise in Practice" (Ahlin, 2019; Saunders et al., 2015). See Appendix A for the interview questions. I interviewed four individual staff members from Wilson Library. None of the interviewees chose to be anonymous and none of the interviews were recorded or transcribed because the turnaround for time

between the interviews and the analysis was so short that the most efficient

method of data collection was to only take notes.

Data Analysis Methods

I reviewed the interview notes by uploading them to Atlas.ti, which I used to

create code tags for "what changed," "why it changed," and "what people thought about

the change." I analyzed the data for a) what changed b) why it changed c) possible

implications for future library functions and d) staff reactions to a, b, and c.

Research Quality and Ethical Considerations

I established credibility through transparently stating my positionality and

relationship to the research and through peer debriefing. Dependability is communicated

through a description in the final report of how and why the research design changed or

evolved from the proposal stage, an honest description of any problems and challenges

that arise, and examples of raw data from interviews alongside conclusions and

interpretations. I also provided thorough description of the research context, subjects, and

methods. I kept track of the research project through an audit trail of draft documents.

Participants had the option to have their data anonymized through pseudonyms

and the removal of identifying information from their responses, so they can receive

recognition if they wish or remain anonymous.

Timetable, Resources, and Budget

	October 2020		November 2020		December 2020		January 2021		February 2021		March 2021		April 2020 - PAPERS DUE 4/9	
Finalize proposal	▓													
Submit IRB application	▓	▓	▓											
Collect study data					▓	▓	▓	▓	▓					
Analyze study data					▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓				
Write the paper							▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓		
Submit draft to advisor												▓		
Revise, submit final draft													▓	

There is no budget because the materials are free: Microsoft Word, Zoom, and possibly Atlas.ti.

Impact and Limitations

An immediate consequence of this study would be detailed insight into how COVID-19 changed the essential functions of the Louis Round Wilson Library. A suggestion for future research could be: how do current events shape the way libraries work? A limitation of the study design is that it does not provide much quantifiable data besides some reading room statistics that can be systematically compared with other institutional responses to COVID-19 or with Kelsey Chandler's previous case study on digital collections at Wilson Library. Chandler's study assessed patron use of digital and physical special collections and her results suggested that patrons desire greater advertisement of Wilson Library's programs and the accessibility of special collections. A delimitation of the study is that a repetition of Kelsey Chandler's survey about digital collections would add value to this study, but it is simply out of the scope of the time given to complete this study with the addition of qualitative interviews. Furthermore, it can be difficult to find survey participants, especially for remote surveys, under normal circumstances and people may be even less inclined to participate because adapting to COVID-19 is dominating everyone's time and energy.

Results and Conclusions

My interview with Jason Tomberlin of Research and Instruction revealed that at the very beginning of COVID-19, research and instruction staff were forced to ask patrons to check back in with them in a couple months because they did not have access

to the materials. This changed in June 2020 when staff were able to reenter the building on a limited basis. Since users were unable to access materials in person, the library waived the usual digitization charges because it did not seem ethical to charge for digitization services when it was the only way for users to request access to materials that users. The influx of digitization requests was handled by setting limits to the number of folders a user could request, but even that created a backlog. Since the Reading Room opened with a limited, appointment only capacity, on December 1, 2020, the backlog from the Digital First scanning project decreased. The Digital First Project is described at greater length in the next paragraph.

In my interview with Taylor deKlerk, the Reading Room Manager at Wilson Library, revealed that there was not a significant shift in the way she approached her work from a theoretical point of view so much as from a logistical point of view. Before COVID-19, she was researching how to improve access in the Reading Room, particularly to unprocessed collections, and contacting peer institutions about how they manage access to their unprocessed collections. In that sense, her mindset had not changed, however, the logistics of creating a "Virtual Reading Room" and then reopening the physical Reading Room with limited capacity in the same year all required significant changes in planning and communication. In June 2020, the Reading Room staff launched a "Digital First" project to answer all research requests digitally when possible. This led to staff being flexible and working more hours on site to operate the book eye scanners. The result has been that 2,000 pages worth of scans have been delivered to researchers around the world since June 2020. The Reading Room staff also works more closely with the Digital Production Center (DPC) as a result of the Digital First project.

In December 2020, the Reading Room staff started piloting an in-person, appointment only, limited access model for accessing materials and that has been their focus since then. This new model allows five patrons to use the Reading Room at a time, the process is much more hands on and requires more planning on the part of the user than it did before COVID-19, when anyone could walk in and request materials the same day. Now, users need to meet with Taylor and make their requests five business days in advance. Most importantly, the pandemic has been seen as an opportunity to evaluate their current systems and use the time that they were closed to make changes and create better communication systems for the future.

Some important statistics from the Reading Room reveal how the logistics of accessibility have changed. In January 2020, there were 385 visits with 862 circulated items. In February 2020, there were 452 visits with 868 circulated items. In the first two weeks of March 2020, there were a total of 199 visits and 466 circulated items. The number of visits is higher than the number of individuals who visited the reading room because the same person will often make multiple trips to the Reading Room. Between December 1, 2020 – April 20, 2021, there were 49 appointments for in-person research, during which 256 collection materials were circulated. The drop in the number of in-person appointments between December 2020 and April 2021 reveals that the "Digital First" project has been a success—most researchers' needs are able to be met digitally through scanning on the part of the Reading Room or DPC staff. However, there are still limits to consider.

The results of my interview with Nicholas Graham, the University Archivist also serving as the Interim Curator for the Southern History Collection, revealed that the

changes wrought in the past year are not so much about the pandemic as they

are about reckoning with the library's problematic collecting history and reflecting on

how to chart a better path forward. The pandemic, as much as it has changed the logistics

of how people work, has primarily been seen as an opportunity to pause and be more

deliberate about who the library collects from, what gets documented and why, and what

that says about the library as an institution.

In addition, through my interview with Nancy Kaiser, a Technical Services

Archivist, I learned that technical services focused on reparative description work in

antebellum finding aids as part of the larger Conscious Editing Initiative. This work has

been going on for some time and is an ongoing project, but the protests of spring 2020

really highlighted for many the importance of reparative description work and that it

should have happened decades ago. Furthermore, the time spent away from other tasks

such as physically accessioning items on site created the time and space needed to move

reparative description work forward in the Southern History Collection. Basically, the

pandemic has created much-needed space to think about the inherent power and

responsibility archivists have and what that means for past and current archival practice

in the wake of the protests that started last spring. Going forward, questions will center

around how to incorporate culturally conscious description into accessioning processes

and how to retain the time and space provided by COVID-19 to prioritize reparative

description work.

One of the lessons learned from the change of delivery in services during

COVID-19 is that the remote delivery of services can sometimes be more efficient and

effective than the delivery of services in person for research and instruction. For example,

Jason Tomberlin said that Zoom consults have worked out well, so for the

future that might mean that fewer consultation happen in person because it saves people

time not to have to have extremely long email conversations or to be physically present at

the library to find the information they need. Instruction sessions may also happen over

Zoom more frequently post-COVID19 because for an instruction session which only

needs to use three to four items, Zoom is a better use of their time than an in-person visit.

These observations will be used to inform decisions going forward—as much as the

materiality of the original document is important, it may work better to do some things

remotely and asynchronously. Zoom and other video conferencing tools have been

around for several years, but it seems like libraries are realizing the full potential of these

technologies to make their research services more accessible.

The conclusions drawn from the interviews suggest that COVID-19 has not

necessarily changed how staff at Wilson Library think about accessibility as an important

component of library services because improved accessibility was already being

researched prior to COVID-19. However, the time and space away from normal activities

provided by COVID-19 has changed how they reflect on the work they have been doing,

why they do it, and how it needs to change for the future. These reflections and the

remote work projects they are producing are leading to changes in how description and

accessioning work is done, how research and instruction are delivered, and how patrons

request materials in ways that are making materials more accessible, and how they are

made digitally accessible. These reflections are leading to real changes in accessibility,

even if accessibility was not the impetus for all of the projects that took precedence

during COVID-19. The different techniques and methods being applied in

reaction to COVID-19 and the protests of spring 2020 are making materials more

accessible.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

1. What do you perceive the impact of COVID-19 to be on the functions of Wilson Library and why?

2. How has the impact of COVID-19 affected the way you do and think about your work and Wilson Library overall?

3. What do you think the potential future implications of COVID-19 are for Wilson Library?

4. Has the AUX WFH project changed the way you see digital collections at Wilson Library? How?

5. How has working from home impacted the way you assess the accessibility and user experience of digital collections?

6. What have user requests been like during COVID-19, and how have you met them?