

The Changing Experiences of Researchers in the Pandemic:

Survey on Research Behavior during the COVID-19 Pandemic at the National Library of Korea

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Abstract

At the end of February 2020, the National Library of Korea was closed, and it was just the beginning of long and tiresome repeats of shutdown and reopening of the library in order to prevent spreading of COVID-19 like many other libraries. This paper aims to clarify the current situation that researchers face which caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and what it means for future strategy. 138 RINK (Research Information Services at National Library of Korea) researchers were requested to answer 13 survey questions regarding their experiences during the pandemic and 39 unique responses were analyzed. The main obstacle during the shutdown appeared to be the limited access to digital contents including e-journal articles, e-books and web-based resources since most of them are highly dependent on online resources. Therefore the usage of online resources was increased remarkably comparing to the same period of the last year. At the same time, they showed strong needs for physical research space while some of researchers expressed the fear of infection which is the reason they hesitated to come back to the library reading rooms. The results of the survey offer keys to the users' actual needs and insights on future direction under the pandemic.

Keywords: research behavior, user behavior, library services under the pandemic, research information services

1. Introduction

The National Library of Korea (NLK), founded in 1945, is a comprehensive and treasured repository of intellectual and informational resources of the Republic of Korea. The NLK has an extensive collection of domestic publications and digital materials that guarantees convenient and equitable access to useful resources for the citizens. With over 14 million collection items, we launched featured services for researchers together with the opening of a research reading room in July 2018 in order to encourage researchers to utilize this precious national collection. Since the launch of the service, about 240 research projects have been done in RINK (Research Information services at the National Library of Korea), which includes national R&D projects, dissertations, journal articles, Korean studies research projects, etc. As of December 2020, 30 projects were officially published as peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and dissertations. And also the NLK supports all kinds of activities of academic organizations, so over 230 meetings have been held in collaborative spaces which located in the research reading room.

2. Survey background

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the NLK closed all library buildings, and then shutdown and re-opened libraries repeatedly in accordance with the social distancing levels. From the first shutdown, the librarians at the RINK strived to stay connected with researchers, so they could be informed about remote accessible resources and services provided by the NLK. They were recommended to pick up personal belongings because nobody knows when it will be possible to come back to the library again.

We decided to find researchers' experiences: how they have done and how they are doing their research since the shutdown of the library; how they feel about such inevitable changes and what we can do better to improve users' experiences. We expected some findings for improving our services under the pandemic. A total of 138 researchers who are currently carrying out their research in the NLK were requested to answer 13 survey questions regarding their experiences during the pandemic.

3. Survey Results

3.1. Before the shutdown of the library

The essential benefit of being a RINK researcher is extended access to a tremendous collection of the NLK. The need for steady research space is the other top priority (Figure1). The most preferred resource type is printed books, but also they are highly dependent on online resources (Figure 2).

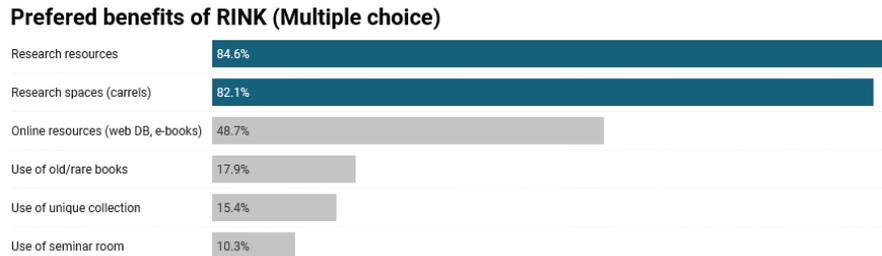


Figure 1

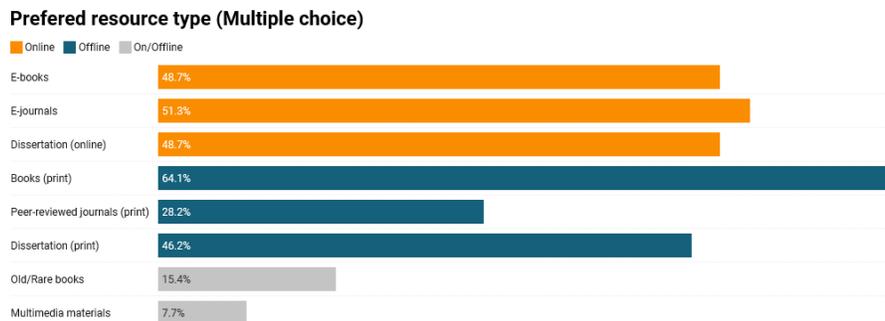


Figure 2

3.2. Amid the shutdown of the library

The first shutdown of the library lasted for about 5 months from February 25th to July 21st of 2020. 89.7% of respondents answered that they continued their research at home while social distancing. All off-site events were cancelled or substituted by online meetings with virtual conference tools. The 2020 RINK annual meeting was on Zoom, and various online tutorials for online databases, statistical tools as well as writing classes were provided for researchers.

Undoubtedly, the most challenging thing for researchers since the COVID-19 pandemic is the inaccessibility to library materials. All of the respondents have struggled with keeping their research going because of the limited access to information resources and lack of personal research space. Many of them, especially independent researchers who are not affiliated with any institutions, seemed to highly rely on physical spaces in this library as well as information resources.

As soon as we realized that the situation would not be terminated in the near future, the NLK worked to secure better access to a variety of information resources in diverse ways. We negotiated with major publishers and vendors to ensure the barrier-free access to full texts. We also encourage national authors to permit fair use so that everybody can use digitized full texts without worrying about infringing the copyright when all libraries were shutdown. Figure 3 shows that the usage of web-based contents was highly increased compared to the same period in 2019.

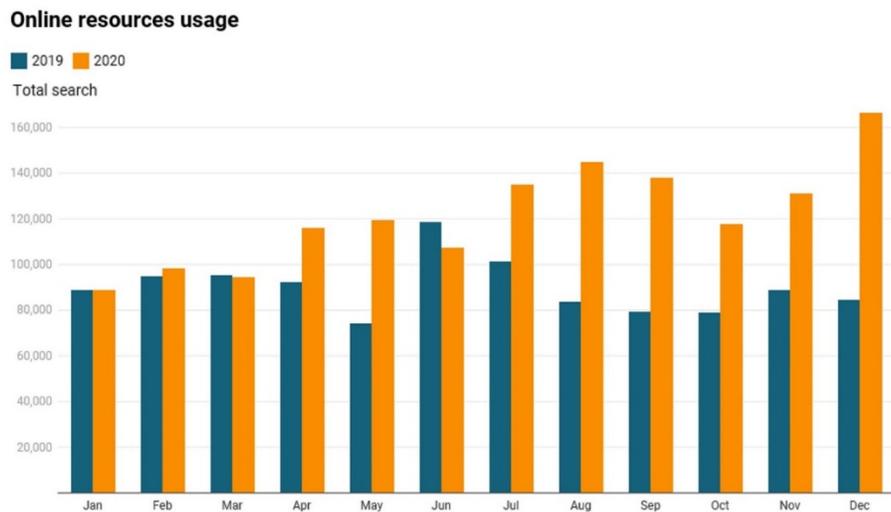


Figure 3

3.3. After reopening the library

In the summer of 2020, when the spread of COVID-19 was alleviated slightly, we decided to reopen the library after long discussions and preparations complying with the guidelines from the KDCA (Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency), which were revised continuously.

When we reopened the library after 5 months shutdown, patrons faced completely different circumstances, requiring appointment for visit, limited seats for social distancing (30-100% of total seats upon social distancing level), shortened hours of operation in order to let them avoid

crowded public transportations during rush hour, weekends closures, etc. The collaboration rooms were also closed as the rules were applied to the total number of gathering members. They also have to follow health screening procedures, and wear masks all through their stay in the library. Figure 4 is the word cloud of keywords from written answers for the difficulties about the new operation rules.

92.3% of respondents visited the library after the reopening. Even in hypothetical circumstance that they are provided with enough access to research materials, 97.4% of respondents answered that they are eager to visit the library physically (Figure 5).

There, however, are some researchers who have never come back to the library. The main reason for hesitating to come to the library is some bothersome steps before visiting such as making prior appointments which became mandatory since the reopening. A considerable proportion of respondents (25%) expressed a fear of infection despite the strict disinfection procedures for library patrons, staffs and facilities (Figure 6).



Figure 4

Do you need physical space even when you have expanded remote access to library materials?

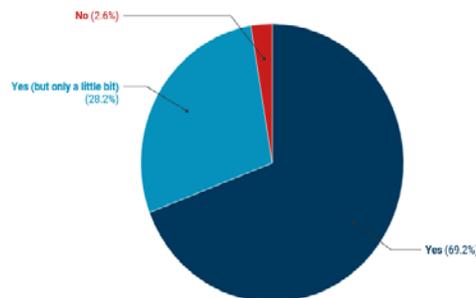


Figure 5

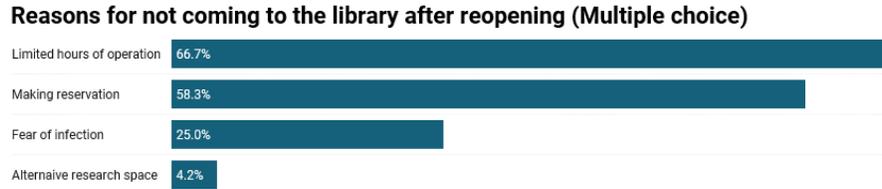


Figure 6

4. Findings and changes

The need for remote access to digital contents has never been higher. The information inequality issues are intensified by the pandemic. There seems to be a considerable gap between researchers with affiliations and independent ones. The affiliated researchers tend to have difficulty in keeping up their research even during the pandemic while others have trouble with finding materials and spaces. The national library is responsible for mitigating the gap.

Regarding the library space, we have been addressing the issues that we should maintain physical space even while we have more comprehensive e-resources than ever before. The researchers showed strong need for the space. Even though they are working independently, they are eager to work in fellowship at the same time. Now we are planning to expand the research reading room with more carrels and collaborative spaces.

As a result of this survey, we clarified the needs of researchers, so we made some developments in services in order to support them better. The reservation time is extended from 5 p.m. until midnight, and we tried to make some online resources remote-accessible until the end of the pandemic with cooperation from the major vendors & publishers. We are also considering making some materials loanable while all physical materials are available only on-site at NLK. In February 2021, we will launch video chat reference service for providing researcher with customized tutorials of online DBs and user orientation sessions.

Not only users but also librarians are experiencing sudden and inevitable digital transitions derived from severe pandemic situation. We need to be more competent in dealing with digital technologies, copyright issues and even in infectious diseases in order to better support users in the pandemic era.