

## **Italy**

### **Italian Libraries During the Coronavirus Emergency**

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During the last two months, at different times and following the spread of the Coronavirus throughout different regions of the country, little by little the Italian libraries had to close to the public and stop their services. At the present (April 16<sup>th</sup>), they are all closed to the public and they will stay closed until May 3<sup>rd</sup>, unless there are new government decisions.

Just as is typical of the library services in Italy, the response to this situation is not homogenous. The different levels of the organization and development of modern technologies in each library impacted both how work was reorganized, and the kind of services offered to the community during the lockdown.

One factor impacting the kind of services offered to the population, was what kind of contract the working staff had. If librarians were employed by a local municipality, they were mainly moved to remote work. In this case they did some work from home with differing degrees of success, depending on the organization of the home institution.

In cases where the staff were privately employed, remote working was not necessarily implemented, so many librarians just had to stay home without working at all. Their salary was only partially guaranteed by social security, and they could not contribute to the community.

And so, some libraries just disappeared. They stopped all forms of communication, even via social media, as none of the staff was asked to keep working. This was the lowest level of service under the situation--not serving at all. In somewhat better cases--but still not satisfactory--some children's librarians continued to post book suggestions, or entire bibliographies on social media. While this was a good idea, often no one checked if the

suggested books were available for digital lending or download. So in the end, this content was not useful.

A medium level of service happened with libraries that used social media to spread content created by others--for example, they shared content from publishers or authors that could be used by children at home. These libraries provided at the very least high quality content, chosen among hundreds of activities, storytelling and reading options for children that were shared via the web during this period. A rich and interesting one is [Lezioni sul sofa](#) (Lessons on the couch), which offers storytelling, crafts, lessons of the kitchen using the language of signs, drawing lessons, and much more, all uploaded by Italian book authors for children.

I also want to point to [Fuad Aziz's studio](#). Aziz is a formerly Kurdish (now Florentine) author and illustrator for children, who daily presents an art activity for children on his Facebook pages.

At the highest level of service, we find libraries that offer real and complete programs online and use the best technology and staff skills to continue to provide services and establish contact with their users.

In this period what was more evident than ever, was how differently libraries are organized in Italy, and how much is invested in training and educating staff in new technologies--or not.

Another problem has been also the different working contracts of library staff.

Public employees – also because of governmental emergency laws – were pushed to encourage remote work. This way some librarians were able to work from home. Some of them had been trained to do so and others not. Therefore in some cases there were very good reading programs for children, prepared professionally and presented well on the screen. But there were also some more “homemade” programs, executed with smartphones or other available devices at home, with different qualities of WiFi. These results were mixed.

Many libraries in this period promoted like never before the lending of e-books and the use of the digital libraries within their library network. It has been reported that in the period between February 24<sup>th</sup> and March 24<sup>th</sup> e-book lending increased in the amount of 104% in Italian libraries compared to the same period in the 2019. (source: [Italian Library Association](#))

Among the many examples of excellent activities in Italian libraries I would like to highlight the following:

[Library of Concesio](#) (Brescia province, Northern Italy)

A wide and rich program for all age ranges with activities primarily for children and families, but not only. This library offered everything from help with understanding the rules and regulations for the COVID19 emergency, to tutorials for games to be downloaded via the library's website and printed at home, to reading for children performed by the children's librarians, to reading clubs via video conference.

[Biblioteca di Melegnano](#) (near Milan in Lombardy)

Everyday this library offers storytelling for children (by the children's librarians) on its Facebook page, or riddles to guess.

[Biblioteche civiche torinesi](#) (Municipal libraries of the city of Turin)

This library promotes the digital library, shows videos of recorded events that took place in the library, hosts a library web radio (<https://www.reteitalianaculturapopolare.org/web-radio.html>) with reading, conferences, entertainment about books, reading of books to children, a help desk for the use of technology, Ask a Librarian (reference desk via video or Whatsapp).

[Biblioteca Centrale Ragazzi di Roma](#) (Rome Central Library for children)

Created a tutorial about the International Children Digital Library, relaunching a digital resource often forgotten, but still valid--even if not updated.

<https://www.facebook.com/centraleragazzi/videos/660911471148186/>

In general activities for children are those most frequently offered by the libraries. It's nice to see that a library can prepare a wide program of video events for its users, but what communities seem to appreciate more is on one side the possibility of getting e-books, movies, and other digital content, being able to choose freely as in the physical library, and on the other hand, being able to stay in contact with the librarians.

Even when the video storytelling is not perfect, children and their parents do prefer to see their favorite librarians on a screen, reading to them as they are used to. This allows them to reconnect with the warm feeling of being part of a community and recognizing somebody they know and miss.

We hope to be more prepared for the future by analyzing what was done now during this health emergency. We will need to prepare a good range of technological tools and skills, so that in case of a new problem (that we do not want!) we can continue to communicate-- physically or remotely if necessary--with the vibrant communities that we care so deeply about.