



**Interview with Christian Dupont
Burns Librarian, Boston College; Associate University Librarian for Special Collections**

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KENNEALLY: As open access and open science policies have taken hold, university librarians flung open the doors to their institutions. But in March 2020, those same libraries were forced to shut as the COVID-19 pandemic took hold.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series, I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content.

What happened behind closed doors when libraries went into lockdown? In a word, librarians innovated, adjusting work and public services during the pandemic to meet researchers' needs. All the while they also reimaged their institutions with eyes on the post-pandemic future.

Christian Dupont at Boston College found opportunity and inspiration in the unexpected quiet. Dupont is Burns Librarian at BC, and Associate University Librarian for Special Collections, with responsibilities for directing the John J. Burns Library for rare books and special collections and the university archives. He has also worked in the library technology sector at Atlas Systems, where he developed the first automated request and workflow management software specifically designed for special collections libraries and archives.

He joins me now to reflect on how Boston College librarians managed through the pandemic, on and off campus. Welcome to the program, Christian Dupont.

DUPONT: Thank you, Christopher – Christophe, if I may. (speaks French). It's a real pleasure to hear my name pronounced in French. Most people simply call myself, or when I introduce myself, say Christian Dupont. We met Christopher, obviously, through various connections, and I've enjoyed the time that – and connections we have to France, there. That's one of the wonderful things about the world about the world of libraries and archives, it connects us to people across the globe and across time, so here we are.

KENNEALLY: (speaks French). We should continue in English in any case. Christian Dupont, the academic libraries and archives, we all know, simply shut down during the pandemic. I'd like you to start by recalling for us how that all took place at Boston College. I'm sure the first concern was for patrons' safety, but you must have worried immediately about how to continue to deliver services.



DUPONT: Yes, I think the metaphor of a slow train wreck comes to my mind as I try to go back to March 2020, which was, of course, the middle of an academic semester here in the US. And then our institutions were communicating with one another and trying to figure out what's happening at other local universities. Soon we realized the same thing is happening across the country. We really just, as you say, had to shut down, leaving campus precipitously, sending students home, closing our library and academic buildings.

It was a traumatic thing, and of course there was fear. Is this a sort of death threat that's come over all of us? If we take the wrong action, are we going to, as you say, endanger our patrons, endanger our own staff? And so on the library administrative team at Boston College, which I am part of, we had to think and act quickly on the safety priorities to be sure, following the directives of, for us, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts as communicated through our university administration.

I'm aware of other academic library colleagues out there who have yet to return to their campuses yet, or can only do so with very special permission. It's been different for us at Boston College, even with our special collections and archives, and that's the vantage I'm going to speak to mostly, and you invited me to talk about here.

Of course academic libraries provide a range of services, but what about libraries and archives? Our mode of operation is, of course, to have patrons, researchers, our students, faculty, come to us to use rare and unique artifacts, documents in person in a controlled, supervised secure reading room. Well, if you can't come into the building and allow patrons to come in, how would you do that? I think we had two concerns. One, how could we provide more services digitally, remotely, virtually? And then at what point could we reopen and following safety measures?

So we actually came up with a plan as of mid-June of 2020 – not this last June, but 2020, to reopen our libraries and archives at Boston College Burns Library.

KENNEALLY: Well, so as you say, Christian Dupont, you were groping in the dark, as we all were at the very beginning of the COVID 19 pandemic, and every day, every week, every month, as it happened, the lockdown became extended. Talk about how you coped with that, and the services that you were forced to adapt due to the restrictions, of course.

DUPONT: Rolling back to March, the first thing was to simply communicate to researchers (inaudible) let everybody know that, in fact, we are closed, but we are going to be working from home, so able to answer a limited range of reference questions about our collections remotely. We do have access to information through our databases, even our rare materials, that would allow us to answer some reference questions. We would also queue up standing requests, and I



think this is what a lot of libraries did. They said we're not onsite now, but we'll start creating a great queue of things that people would like to have scanned when we get back in the library. For us that meant we could get back in the building bringing some of our staff onsite as early as May of 2020. So that would mean that staff could retrieve rare materials, archival documents, put them under a scanning device, and then send those scans to researchers, so at least fulfilling in a limited way the ability to consult materials that they would otherwise have to see in person.

KENNEALLY: And it must have meant, Christian Dupont, thinking about the collection, the archive in a new way because it's digital forward at that point.

DUPONT: Right. So the thing we start thinking about, post-pandemic, what kind of library services – how will we adapt our services to change. So again, providing scans to an individual of our collections for their limited research use. I say that because that means that the researcher enters into an agreement with us when they accept those scans saying it's for their research only. We are not publishing these documents to the Web because some of them are protected by copyright, and we have a responsibility under Section 108 of the copyright statutes to make sure that we are not violating copyright by providing – essentially publishing images on the Web. And our researchers should not be doing the same, either. They take on that responsibility and risk if they do so.

But since we're scanning so much, and we're scanning maybe larger volumes of material, how might we be able to share that going forward? Or do we prospectively scan a collection? If somebody's only asked for a few pages of the book, do we go ahead and scan the entire book and just make it available digitally? We had been doing that already, but I think the amount of scanning requests that we were seeing made us think that maybe we should permanently adapt our services to increase that capacity. And also take a hard look at our risk tolerance. How are we respecting copyright limitations? A very interesting dialogue, I know you've been talking about this on your podcasts.

KENNEALLY: And the shuttling you described to get that digitization accomplished was only a part of the work you had to do, and a lot of that was undertaken offsite. So what were you or librarians who were not actually in the physical building be doing during your workday?

DUPONT: It's a tenet of our work that especially when you're cataloguing a rare book, want to have that book in hand. Well, you don't always have the book in hand. How much can you do without it in hand? And we didn't do a lot of – some libraries did this, having staff that were onsite do scans of materials so that a cataloguer could look at a scan of a title page and then catalogue from home. We would verify things that way, we had staff come in, look at a few items, take some notes, take some scans, and then would do the actual cataloguing or archival descriptive work from home. But by and large, we shifted towards retrospective projects. There's a lot of database cleanup, normalizing dates, making sure that older records comply with



current standards, systematically reviewing errors and error checking. That kind of thing we did a lot of, and we found – sometimes when you – so it's deferred maintenance, put it under that heading. (inaudible) finally you get to work on things that you'd put off before.

KENNEALLY: When you finally did reopen to researchers at Boston College, what had changed at the library? Do you anticipate even adjusting those services still further in the future?

DUPONT: A year later, especially in Massachusetts where a large population are vaccinated, our governor has lifted restrictions, life has returned to pretty much the normal in some ways. So our reading room, apart from building renovations that we're right in the middle of right now has returned to more normal protocols. So that feels good. And we are more respectful, more conscious, and certainly want to make our patrons feel as comfortable as possible, and communicate a lot more about our expectations around health and safety. So that's something that's a permanent change I think we'll see going on.

If we have to roll back and become more restrictive in response to health regulations, we're prepared to do that and to do that quickly. We're much more prepared. We never thought about doing the kinds of things we did before, nobody did, but now would be a reflex. We have the equipment, we know what to do. And there'd be less stress about it.

That's something that, no matter what business you're in, you had to change the way you work. It created a lot of stress for people because everyone has different ways of responding to that health emergency, and still do. And then when this was all mapped, this whole last year in the pandemic, of course across the world, particularly our country, movements and awareness of social justice issues that were happening. And so when you are subjecting some of your staff to coming onsite, which would pose a greater health risk for them, and some would stay at home, what is the equity in that? How do we balance? How do we share that? No, we can't bring all of our staff back because that would not allow us to de-densify sufficiently. So I'm just hinting at the kind of things that are common to everyone in the different business environments they work with around these equity issues and yet providing access to services.

KENNEALLY: Well, I've very glad you raised that point about equity, Christian Dupont, because it leads me to a question I wanted to ask about how library users had changed their expectations about the library, and how you learned about what they value the most.

DUPONT: People are demanding more digital access to collections. We've always had to adjust expectations. We're going to have to adjust them in a new mode now, as we try to find ways to increase the amount of digitization that we can do within our budgets of human and capital expenses, and then within copyright guidance, as well. So those are things we've had to do.



I think they, at the same time, really value onsite services, and we're about the artifact of the book and manuscript. I expect when we have more students back on campus in the fall and able to have them in our library during class that they're going to be so excited to work with our sources the way they had before. They might have a real nostalgia for that.

So I think the artifact is not dead, it'll come back. And yet at the same time we've learned that we can do a lot of research support and instruction virtually, so I think we'll be working in a hybrid mode, and need to increase the richness of that.

KENNEALLY: And technology in a library is more than just digitization, of course. Has the pandemic given you ideas for new technologies, new approaches, new workflows that you would like to see developed?

DUPONT: When I was growing up – I'm nearing 60 at my age right now, but as we just talk about long-distance phone calls, it would be video calls in the future, and everybody seemed to want that. I think it would be an amazing technology. And then we had it for many years and never really used it. And now we've had to use it and it's become really part of our lives.

Could we not work with librarians who have similar thematic (sp?) collections at other institutions, to share, almost kind of a bartering. Well, you have that copy of a book. It's so rare we'll never get a copy of it, but if you were to record a video presentation or digitize it or share some information or let us join a live presentation with you for our students at BC, maybe we'll do the same thing for you. It's a different mentality to collaborate that way across institutions.

Virtual reading rooms, that would be another technology support that we need. So the idea that when you come into a special collections reading room in person, we need to create a secure environment for the document to make sure that it's not damaged, that it's not stolen, obviously. And we're making sure that again copyright regulations are respected in that environment. So if we present something to you digitally, we need to have a way of presenting it really through a controlled portal. If you're looking at some piece of say original correspondence that would very much be under the restrictions of a literary estate, we can't just publish it on the Web. But can we provide a secure access for a limited period of time scheduled in which the user then would not be able to again download the document or have the potential to abuse their access and violate copyright. That we are doing so, providing them access responsibly as a library.

That would be one thing I'd really like to see happen coming out of this experience of pandemic.

KENNEALLY: Well, we've been talking about the way that the libraries have changed and their systems have changed, but I want to ask, finally, Christian Dupont, about how you have changed. Tell us about this experience, how it's shaped your perspective on your chosen profession.



DUPONT: Well, I see great value in what I do, just for the content that we manage. We, like many libraries during the pandemic, started deliberately collecting stories of the pandemic. We focused ours on the university community, we invited students and faculty to contribute their experience in the form of stories of the documentation to submit to our archives with the idea that in the future people will look back on this time, just like researchers and even (inaudible) some novelists looking back on the 1918 flu pandemic. Well, thank goodness there were records from that time that give us perspective on what happened and how it affected people's lives.

I think the other thing is just, as a manager, responsible for a staff of people, that much more conscious of how people respond in different ways to, in this case, a health emergency that has its social justice dimensions to it, and heightened awareness. And the idea that we want to do better, be better, and use the experiences we have, and learn from them to do that. That's in my consciousness very much as a manager in a more direct, immediate way than it was prior to the onset of the pandemic.

KENNEALLY: Christian Dupont, Burns Librarian at Boston College. Thank you so much for joining me on the program. (speaks French).

DUPONT: (speaks French). Thank you. Thank you again for the invitation to the listeners out there. I hope this was something for you to reflect on.

KENNEALLY: Our co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. You can subscribe to this program wherever you go for podcasts, and please do follow us on Twitter and Facebook. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for listening. Join us again soon for another Velocity of Content podcast from CCC.

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