

# Library service experience during and post COVID-19 outbreak: the case of the National Library of China

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## Abstract :

*Faced with the threat of COVID-19 outbreak, public libraries developed innovative practices to deal with the pandemic by providing information service, expanding online and digital service and reading promotion activities. The aim of the study is to explore the service experience of the National Library of China during the outbreak and after the reopening. It is found that the enrichment of online and digital services, as well as the combination with the use of social media, facilitate the service provided during the closure and also bring new angels into the development of libraries in the post pandemic era.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19; National Library of China; Post-pandemic era; Library services; Online services.

## Introduction:

The COVID-19 pandemic has swept across the world, disrupting almost every aspect of social life and impacting nearly every profession. Undoubtedly public libraries are included. The outbreak of the pandemic leads to the shutdown of public libraries, namely the closure of their physical spaces and onsite services. Globally, according to IFLA (2020), public library systems in more than 110 countries and territories are closed or partially closed and more than 120 national libraries have experienced a period of closure during the pandemic.

Although the traditional service modes of public libraries, as a result, are challenged, they have remained true to their tenet as information provider, continuing to operate and respond to the crisis by turning to rely on online services and digital resources. Research shows that while 98% of American public libraries experienced building closure, over half of them expanded or added online services, such as online renewal and online streaming

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(American Public Library Association, 2020). This is quite a common phenomenon under the global context (IFLA 2020). Information provision is still an important aspect of the COVID-19 response (Smith, 2020).

Chinese library field is inevitably affected by the global emergency. The national public library system is affected by the outbreak and quite a lot of the public libraries of all levels are closed for different period of time. Although the onsite services are interrupted, libraries services are not fully stopped. Innovation on service mode and service system has been made to continue library's service for users during the lockdown. Hence, many libraries transfer to online service and digital resources (Guo, 2022).

This paper aims to introduce and examine the service experience of the National Library of China during the COVID-19 outbreak and after the reopening, trying to draw a full picture of the measures that can be taken in dealing with the emergency situation.

#### **Methods :**

Taking the National Library of China as the subject, the current study adopts the approach of case study to summarize and analyze its reactions during the pandemic. The National Library of China is examined as a public library here to explore the impacts caused by the pandemic to the public service of the library and responses of the library to it. The data needed in the study is mainly collected from the library's official website, WeChat and Weibo official accounts, together with the information related to libraries from other channels of social media to supplement the quantitative data.

The National Library of China (NLC) was founded in 1909. It serves as the repository of the nation's publications, a national bibliographic center, a national center for preservation and conservation of ancient books and national museum of classic books, with the total floor area reaching 280 thousand square meters. As national library, NLC has the privilege of receiving legal deposit of Chinese books. Under the direct authority and guidance of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China, it has a collection of more than 40 million volumes and pieces and over 2000 terabytes of digital resources. As public library, it opens daily to the public before the pandemic. The public service provided by the NLC includes literature lending and reference, information consultation, public trainings, etc (National Library of China, n.d.). The National Digital Library of China (NDL) serves as the major portal for digital resources, supplemented by library mobile APP, WeChat official account and Weibo account.

#### **Service experience during the COVID-19 outbreak :**

In response to the outbreak of the pandemic, the NLC closed on 24 January 2020. On 12 May 2020, it reopened and started the phased reopening plan.

### **Emergency response:**

The NLC responded promptly to the onset of the outbreak. Safety training was arranged to teach staff of reader service with measures of epidemic prevention, requiring them to wear masks at work and, at the same time, urging patrons to wear masks as well. The library went into temporary full closure on 24 January 2020 and the leading and coordinating group for epidemic prevention and control was established immediately. The library started the management system of health monitor, daily report, entrance check and registration. All the meeting, visiting and lecture schedules were canceled or delayed, as closed management was employed for the library physical space. Staff was asked to work from home, except those who were working on the key positions. “Zero reporting system”, which was the daily report of any pandemic related cases of each department, including no cases scenario, was implemented to monitor the physical fitness of staff.

### **Information services:**

Even though in emergency situations, information disseminator is still one of the traditional roles of library (Featherstone, Lyon and Ruffin, 2008). With the stop of lending service of physical books, the NLC played its traditional role by putting focus on expanding its digital resources. Some representative examples were: special bookshelves about pandemic control were set up in the NDL App and WeChat service account, consisting of over 200 e-books from over 40 publishers; the NLC expanded access to 86 databases related to medical and health, science technology and online learning to the public, after authorized by relevant organizations; online courses were also pushed to users, facilitating digital learning. Besides, the NLC also built and published a themed database on fighting COVID-19, comprising relevant online resources (National Library of China, 2020a).

As another traditional role, government partners, the NLC has been providing information reference services to the legislative and decision-making body for the fight against COVID-19. It also compiled special report on the prevention and control of coronavirus, and thematic research on the building of public safety system, emergency capacity of public health institutes, national strategic reserving and international pandemic response.

### **Digital resource building:**

The NLC officially launched the project of building the repository of the “War against COVID-19”, on 23 April 2020, in order to safeguard the national memories of the efforts that made by all sectors of society in fighting the pandemic. The project aimed to collect and preserve all forms of materials that reflect people from all walks of life fighting against COVID-19 through a wide range of network, including literature, pictures, audio and video resources, manuscripts, letters, calligraphic and painting works, etc. The interviews of witnesses and participants would be added to the repository to build a vivid memory bank, recording the “War Against COVID-19” in China. Over 2000 pieces of resources have been added to the collection (National Library of China, 2020b).

### **Reading promotion activities:**

The NLC made efforts to promote public reading during this particular period to fully shoulder its function of social education. Apart from enriching online reading resources, the NLC also marketed selected and thematic reading materials to users through all channels. On the World Book and Copyright Day, NLC cooperated with companies, like Beijing MTR Corporation Limited, and media to organize a series of reading activities, such as “Family Reading Contest” and “Poem Fighting the COVID”. By using its cloud platform and new media, the reading materials could be send to users and improve its social influence (National Library of China, 2020a). As the national library with the responsibility of instructing libraries of all levels nationwide, NLC carried out online training, as well as reading resources promotion to librarians around the country to facilitate their professional improvement during the time of difficulty.

### **Service experience after the reopening:**

With the pandemic control transiting into the new normal, the NLC made plan for phased reopening, based on the *Guidance on the Re-opening of Public Libraries and Cultural Centers*, issued by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2020). On 12 May 2020, after closed for 109 days, NLC reopened its South Area. On 28 July 2020, NLC reopened exhibitions in the National Museum of Classic Books. The North Area, Children’s Library and Ancient Books Library were reopened on 1 October 2020. On the basis of expanded online services, onsite services of reader registration, lending, consultation and copying were resumed.

### **Optimizing space layout:**

At the first phase of reopening, 300 seats were arranged with safe distance in the South Area. Librarians were asked to keep at least 1 meter from readers when offering services. Quite a lot of necessary marks, one meter lines, guides signs and markings for standing in elevators, as well as information posters and screens were posted and set up. Ventilation of 20 to 30 minutes was conducted at least 3 times a day. The windows of the reading zones in the South Area would be opened to let fresh air flow through the interior of the building.

### **Entry reservation:**

The reopening was based on entry reservation and crowd control. To control the number of visitors entering the library space and reading rooms, a 1200 person limit per day was employed during the first phase. Visitors could make reservation within 3 days ahead of entry, through the reader service in WeChat service account and telephone. All visitors were subject to temperature checks and mask requirements. An isolation room was also set up. With the reopening area broadening, restriction on number of daily visitors was lifted gradually, but book-in-advance still remained.

### **Disinfection and cleaning:**

The disinfection of the reopening area was inevitable. Surfaces of frequent contact, such as keyboards and doorknobs, were thoroughly disinfected and hand sanitizer was provided in reading rooms and public areas. The library would be closed for one hour in the noon for ventilation and disinfection during open days before 1 April 2021. For the disinfection of books, different methods were applied to different types of literature. For newly arrived books, isolation and static sterilization were used. For the books circulated in the reading rooms, librarians would put them back to shelves after putting them static for a while. For the returning books, there were centralized book return center and disinfection center using the equipment of UV sterilizer and ozone sterilizer. Readers could also use self-service machine to disinfect the book of their pick.

### **Discussion :**

Though the impact brought by the pandemic is devastating, it offers an opportunity for the library field to rethink the service that public libraries can provide in terms of its mode and scope under the new normal. It is pointed out that Chinese libraries mainly provide four categories of services during the pandemic, including reading promotion, promotion of digital resources, creative activities and other regular ones (Lu 2021). The focus of the NLC, innovative reading and digital resources promotion, follows the common trend of library service since the outbreak.

A fact can be noted that the function of digital library is getting increasingly prominent. As digital resources becoming the only available collections for physically closed libraries, it is with urgent necessity to make improvement over the building and maintenance of digital resources (Ćirić and Ćirić, 2021). The NLC pays attention to providing and marketing well organized digital resources to users as well as the building and enriching of its digital databases. Libraries transitions to be part-digital is essential, as it enables the public to access resources both onsite and remotely, well fitting into the emergency situations, including the public health incident. For modern public library system, digital libraries are gradually becoming the cornerstone (IFLA, 2020).

The usage of social media has not been new to the library field and its common combination with public libraries is the use of social media to market library resources and services as well as encourage reading (Carscaddon and Chapman, 2013). Together with the massive use of social media, the drawbacks of the physically closed libraries can be made up to a large extent. As social media usage during disasters or emergency situations is acknowledged theoretically and practically (Alajmi and Albudaiwi, 2020), public libraries' application of social media, such as WeChat, Weibo, and library App in the case of the NLC, during the pandemic also become a common and convenient way for libraries to keep contact with users and promote resources, services and events.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has already become a long-term reality. The scope and severity of the impact of the pandemic is quite unexpected. While facing the severe challenge, not only the Chinese library field, but global librarianship is seeing a key opportunity for profound changes. There is, firstly, an urgent need of improving library's security and emergency response capabilities in the face of public health incidents. Secondly, there is the need to adapt to the new digital, connected and intelligent world. The growth of online services of library makes it clear that promoting service innovation with new technologies has become an unavoidable trend of the time. Thirdly, the value of the library in improving public information literacy and enhancing public governance capabilities should be fully played.

To deal effectively with those challenges, several paths could be followed. Public library should institute emergency operation regulations to improve its emergency management capacity and accelerate the formation of regulations and standards in the aspects of safe library space design, library collections and equipment cleaning and disinfection. Secondly, the library is in need of smart transformation by taking advantage of the new generation of technologies, such as 5G, cloud computing and artificial intelligence, so that public demands for timely reading and learning materials at home can be met through cloud resources integration and service. The NLC has made smart transformation and the build of a national smart library network into its 14th five year plan (National Library of China, 2021). Finally, open exchanges and cooperation among libraries and other social institutions are still necessary to push for online integration and disclosure of high-quality reading resources from various fields and offline sharing and circulation, making the access of reading materials more convenient and flexible, better serve the users.

**Conclusion :**

The present study makes an overall examine of the service experience of the NLC during the COVID-19 outbreak and after its reopening. The major services provided during closure, namely the expanding of digital resources, online reading promotion and digital resources building, follow the trend of the world library field in coping with the crisis and make improvements towards the finalizing modern service system of the library. Faced with the new reality, public libraries could seek breakthrough from the completion of emergency management, advancing of modern new technology and open cooperation to better suit the need of post pandemic librarianship.

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