

Postprint: Measures and Reflections of Overseas Library Organizations in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Public health emergencies directly impact library operations and user needs. Adopting proactive and effective measures to address these impacts helps libraries enhance their service capabilities and strengthen their core competitiveness. The response measures taken by foreign library organizations can provide references and insights for domestic library organizations. [Method/Process] Through web-based investigation and literature review, 13 foreign library organizations were selected as case studies. Content analysis and case study methods were applied to statements, notices, and announcements regarding COVID-19 response published on their official websites, with key points summarized to provide reference for domestic library organizations in responding to public health emergencies. [Results/Conclusion] Findings reveal that the overall characteristics of foreign library organizations' response measures are: fully embodying humanistic care, ensuring information authenticity and reliability, guaranteeing user resource access, and seeking excellent practice cases. It is recommended that domestic library organizations promptly issue response statements, reinforce the demand-oriented philosophy, enhance capabilities for supporting network information resources, emphasize the implementation of broad information literacy education, and strengthen the awareness of drawing upon excellent practice cases to improve measures and enhance response strategies.

Full Text

Preamble

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Measures and Reflections of Foreign Library Organizations in Response to COVID-19

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Abstract: [Purpose/Significance] Public health emergencies directly impact library operations and user demands. Taking proactive and effective measures to address these impacts helps libraries enhance their service capabilities and core competitiveness. The response measures adopted by foreign library organizations can provide valuable references and insights for domestic libraries. [Method/Process] Using web-based surveys and literature research, this study selected 13 foreign library organizations for investigation. Through content analysis and case studies of COVID-19-related statements, notices, and announcements published on their official websites, the study summarized key approaches to provide references for domestic libraries in responding to public health emergencies. [Result/Conclusion] The findings reveal that foreign library organizations' responses are characterized by: fully embodying humanistic care, ensuring information authenticity and reliability, guaranteeing user resource access, and seeking excellent practice cases. It is recommended that domestic library organizations promptly release response statements, strengthen demand-oriented principles, enhance network information resource guarantee capabilities, implement pan-information literacy education, and actively learn from excellent practices to improve their response strategies.

Keywords: COVID-19; foreign library organizations; library services; response measures

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On January 30, 2020, the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus outbreak a public health emergency of international concern and issued temporary recommendations under the International Health Regulations (2005). On February 11, the disease was officially named COVID-19. According to WHO's daily situation reports, as of 16:00 on May 24, global cumulative confirmed cases had exceeded 5.2 million, with over 330,000 deaths. This pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges to libraries worldwide, raising common concerns about how to better fulfill functions and provide services during public health emergencies. Many libraries have temporarily closed to curb virus transmission while making extensive efforts to ensure continued access to information and services in online environments. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) announced on April 6 that UNESCO, together with IFLA and other organizations, issued a statement titled "Turning the Threat of COVID-19 into an Opportunity for Greater Support to Documentary Heritage," emphasizing that as misinformation about the pandemic increases, memory institutions can col-

lect, classify, and disseminate fact-based scientific information, provide critical perspectives, and document responses to COVID-19 to help future generations understand the pandemic's severity and societal impact. Additionally, various library organizations have released relevant policies and statements outlining their positions and proposing response strategies.

2. Related Research and Survey Object Overview

2.1 Related Research

Public health emergencies fall under the category of sudden incidents, posing significant tests to libraries' emergency management capabilities. Libraries possess abundant physical and electronic resources and can provide diversified services through both online and offline channels. However, emergencies inevitably impact library services to varying degrees, requiring libraries to maintain emergency management awareness, assess potential impacts, establish professional emergency response teams, develop comprehensive emergency management frameworks and workflows tailored to their actual conditions, and formulate contingency plans aligned with evolving circumstances to demonstrate service capacity and social governance levels. Libraries must also proactively participate in strategic planning and understand users' immediate information needs, ensuring comprehensive safety for staff and users, guaranteeing normal resource access, and maintaining orderly service provision. They should play roles in emergency management platform construction, information services, emergency preparedness, decision support, and big data analysis, while actively improving early warning mechanisms and leveraging intelligence functions to support decision-making departments. In responding to this pandemic, foreign libraries have demonstrated proactive attitudes and rapid, effective responses, effectively disseminating authoritative knowledge and providing essential services. Library organizations are accelerating efforts to provide members with exclusive programs, response resources, online training, and necessary information to guide correct decision-making.

2.2 Survey Object Overview

Through web and literature surveys, this study found that foreign library organizations responded proactively to the pandemic with timely strategies, though comprehensive summaries of exemplary cases remain limited. This research primarily investigates outstanding cases listed on IFLA's "COVID-19 and the Global Library Field" webpage, ultimately selecting 13 foreign library organizations: Online Computer Library Center (OCLC), American Library Association (ALA), Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL), Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), Deutscher Bibliotheksverband e.V. (DBV), Association des Bibliothécaires de France (ABF), Hrvatsko knjižničarsko društvo (HKD),

Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa (LIANZA), Korean Library Association (KLA), and African Library and Information Associations and Institutions (AfLIA). Content analysis and case studies were conducted on COVID-19 statements and announcements published on their official websites to identify overall characteristics and summarize best practices, aiming to provide actionable recommendations for domestic libraries. The organizations, their primary measures, and release dates (all 2020) are shown in Table 1 .

3. Characteristics of Foreign Library Organizations' Response Measures

3.1 Fully Reflecting Humanistic Care

As COVID-19 primarily spreads through respiratory droplets and contact, libraries, as places of congregation, must actively respond by adjusting service layouts. Libraries have always been “people-oriented” institutions, making it essential to prioritize human interests and needs. The investigation revealed four main aspects: First, ensuring personnel safety by closing physical spaces and canceling offline activities (seminars, exhibitions, lectures) to prevent gatherings and curb virus transmission, thereby protecting staff and users. OCLC began canceling offline events in late February, and ALA canceled its annual conference and exhibition. Second, understanding personnel situations through online meetings to stay informed about staff and community conditions, enabling timely support. ALIA established a relief fund for members experiencing income reduction due to COVID-19. Third, protecting staff interests by ensuring salaries remain unaffected despite closures. ACRL, in collaboration with the ALA Allied Professional Association, encouraged libraries to provide full paid leave, including health insurance, for all staff during closures. Fourth, ensuring user convenience—all 13 organizations created dedicated “COVID-19” sections on their homepage, enabling visitors to access information without complex searches, and provided detailed contact methods for users to reach librarians, offering great convenience during the pandemic.

3.2 Ensuring User Resource Access

Libraries possess rich resources for user access and utilization. However, the pandemic prevented users from accessing physical materials and created location-based restrictions for electronic resources. To address this and ensure continued research, discovery, and learning, many libraries integrated and opened available resources, eliminated remote access restrictions, and provided free resources and access guides online, with emergency management teams maintaining these processes. SCONUL recommended to libraries, publishers, aggregators, and suppliers: temporarily cancel interlibrary loan or photocopying restrictions to help students graduate; temporarily waive fees to ensure faculty and student access; extend trial access periods; postpone or minimize planned price increases;

develop temporary paywall removal plans; immediately open all COVID-19, coronavirus, vaccine, and antiviral drug-related content and datasets to facilitate research and public health responses; and remove technical restrictions on text and data mining. JISC provided guidance on remote resource access and service usage, directly communicating with users about irreparable network limitations. OCLC proactively tested its internal infrastructure to accommodate increased remote system access, aggregating resources from various library organizations on WebJunction to facilitate fact-aware and timely access for users and librarians, as shown in Table 2 .

3.3 Ensuring Information Authenticity and Reliability

As noted in the “NMC Horizon Report: 2017 Library Edition,” libraries remain gatekeepers of rich information and knowledge—a responsibility that does not easily change. Libraries must always shoulder the mission of delivering and integrating information for users. During the pandemic, information became more complex and difficult to verify, risking users being “drowned” in a sea of mixed-quality information. Libraries must proactively help users evaluate and select information, providing timely policy recommendations and decision-making support while equipping librarians with necessary information for orderly work. OCLC continuously monitors the latest WHO reports and displays reliable information sources on WorldCat.org for user browsing. ALIA publishes hourly updates on library service changes across Australian regions. CILIP provides information including committee statements, current risk levels, general and sector-specific guidance, and policies. ALA offers comprehensive information for librarians and users, including latest updates from association members, library-specific policy recommendations, educational and preventive information, and CDC common-sense guidance. ALA’s information is particularly comprehensive and reliable, with details shown in Table 3 .

3.4 Seeking Excellent Practice Cases

Proactively learning from excellent practices helps improve existing measures and optimize frameworks, providing more detailed professional guidance for librarians and better services for users. IFLA encourages global libraries to share cases and information to collectively address pandemic challenges, creating the “COVID-19 and the Global Library Field” section to gather ideas from various libraries’ experiences. This initiative summarizes necessary measures and excellent cases regarding closures, resource access, material handling, social distancing, remote services, remote work management, and resource reallocation, presenting global library actions during the pandemic and facilitating peer learning. OCLC added discussion boards for users to share information, ideas, and best practices. ALIA collects exemplary cases from African libraries in a dedicated column. ACRL conducted questionnaire surveys on academic libraries’ specific response measures to help stakeholders better understand current challenges, with main survey content shown in Table 4 .

4. Reflections for Chinese Library Organizations in Responding to Public Health Emergencies

4.1 Timely Release of Response Statements

While Chinese library organizations have taken timely measures such as closures, free resource access, and online lectures, they lack systematic statements outlining overall service plans at the macro level. This makes it difficult for users to comprehensively understand available services and delivery methods, increasing time costs and creating poor experiences. Promptly releasing response statements is the optimal solution to this problem, guiding users to understand current services and actions, facilitating early effective communication, enabling timely adjustments based on evolving situations and user needs, and ensuring orderly, high-quality, and efficient services.

4.2 Strengthening the Demand-Oriented Concept

“Demand-oriented, resource-based, technology-enabled, and service-centered” describes the relationship among library development elements in the new environment. Demand is the fundamental origin determining library services. The British Library’s “Living Knowledge” report identifies “rising user expectations” as a key theme, making it essential to prioritize meeting user information needs. During public health emergencies, libraries should address three levels of demand: First, institutional needs—closing physical spaces and suspending offline activities to prevent gatherings. Second, user needs—shifting more users to online access requires not only ensuring resource access for learning and research but also moving urgent offline activities (academic seminars, professional lectures) online, creating dedicated pandemic sections with 科普 and protection knowledge, compiling accessible resources and service lists, maintaining network infrastructure, and arranging appropriate work for interning students. Third, staff needs—releasing guidelines for librarians, providing remote work guidance and training, and offering necessary support to help staff cope with challenges.

4.3 Enhancing Network Information Resource Guarantee Capacity

In the digital age, network information resources are favored for their rapid updates, rich content, and easy access. Users no longer prefer fragmented information but need solutions for specific problems and decision-making support. During the pandemic, dependence on network resources has deepened, demanding higher quality and richness. Libraries must respond quickly by providing contextually embedded resources through four approaches: First, integrating user contexts—providing general resources for all users to understand the situation and specialized resources for researchers based on age, education, profession, and physical condition. Second, emphasizing knowledge association—organizing scattered resources into structured knowledge to meet decision-making needs. Third, expanding access capacity—accommodating increased online users during closures. Fourth, providing remote training—offering guidance and support

for resource access issues during physical space closures.

4.4 Emphasizing the Implementation of Pan-Information Literacy Education

In today's highly networked environment, the public is inundated with difficult-to-verify information. During public health emergencies, external factors (social, economic) and internal factors (anxiety, restlessness) increase the risk of users unknowingly encountering misinformation with serious consequences. Identifying authentic information is a critical challenge. Libraries must leverage their educational function, proactively understand user information needs, provide demand-oriented services, and implement pan-information literacy education to enhance users' professional knowledge and capabilities through four paths: First, sensing information—maintaining sensitivity to authoritative messages from international, national, and government sources to adjust strategies correctly. Second, discerning information—helping users screen and judge information quality, ensuring even 科普 information is authoritatively confirmed. Third, enhancing evaluation skills—providing online training and scientific interpretation to improve users' ability to identify false information and make correct choices. Fourth, cultivating decision-making ability—the ultimate goal is enabling users to progress from novice to expert, from basic information awareness to innovative mastery for correct decision-making when necessary.

4.5 Enhancing Awareness of Learning from Excellent Practice Cases

Libraries are not isolated buildings but growing organisms whose development requires collective effort from the library community. When crises occur, libraries of different capacities respond differently, necessitating mutual learning and case absorption. Three methods facilitate this: First, questionnaires—designing surveys about other libraries' actions (open to non-peers) and analyzing results for adaptable solutions. Second, peer exchange—actively sharing best practices while warning others through error case demonstrations. Third, discussion forums—creating open interactive spaces to solicit public opinions, best practices, and ideas for information and case sharing.

The era of digital networks is driving libraries beyond traditional constraints. User demands have shifted libraries from a “resource-based” to a “service-based” transformation period, fundamentally changing how they respond to challenges. Public health emergencies bring crises and tests—specifically, how to timely respond to user needs in the current environment, deliver information and knowledge services entirely online, and provide decision-making support when necessary. Additionally, libraries must fully consider staff needs, provide correct guidance, and help them face challenges with confidence. To pass this test, library organizations must “take the initiative,” remain people-centered and demand-oriented, drive development through services, and seek and improve response strategies with proactivity and creativity to form optimal paths tailored to their actual conditions.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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