

An Analysis of Library Reading Service Strategies in the Context of Public Health Emergencies: A Postprint Based on Research on Reading Promotion During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Public emergencies affect and transform people's daily lives and behavioral habits. Under extraordinary circumstances, public reading needs, methods, and habits undergo corresponding changes, presenting new challenges and demands for library reading promotion services. [Method/Process] Based on relevant theoretical and legal foundations, this study examines the responsibilities and functions undertaken by library reading services during public emergencies, and proposes targeted reading service supply strategies and feasible recommendations by integrating the characteristics of public reading needs and behavioral habits under the current "COVID-19" pandemic. [Results/Conclusion] Libraries should scientifically screen information related to public emergencies, actively develop crisis-responsive selective dissemination of information services, strengthen online reading promotion while concurrently focusing on psychological adjustment of reader communities, and further enhance their value functions and influence.

Full Text

Preamble

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Exploring Library Reading Service Strategies from the Perspective of Public Emergencies: A Study Based on Reading Promotion During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

[**Purpose/Significance**] Public emergencies affect and transform people's daily lives and behavioral habits. In abnormal environments, public reading demands, methods, and habits change accordingly, posing new challenges and requirements for library reading promotion services. [**Method/Process**] Based on relevant theories and legal principles, this paper examines the responsibilities and functions of library reading services during public emergencies. Combining the characteristics of public reading needs and behavioral patterns during the current COVID-19 pandemic, it proposes targeted reading service supply strategies and feasible recommendations. [**Result/Conclusion**] Libraries should scientifically screen information related to public emergencies, actively provide crisis-responsive thematic services, strengthen online reading promotion while emphasizing psychological adjustment for reader groups, and further enhance their value functions and social influence.

Keywords: public emergencies; COVID-19; library; reading services

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Introduction

In recent years, China has experienced a high incidence of various public emergencies, which have caused varying degrees of casualties, property damage, and ecological destruction, seriously endangering public safety, exerting significant impacts on economic and social development, and profoundly affecting people's normal lives and behavioral habits. The pneumonia outbreak caused by the novel coronavirus (hereinafter referred to as "COVID-19") that erupted before the Spring Festival of 2020 and rapidly spread across the nation and globally forced all provinces in China to activate Level I public health emergency responses. On January 30, the WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus declared in Geneva that the COVID-19 outbreak constituted a "public health emergency of international concern."

According to China's Emergency Response Law, "public emergencies" refer to natural disasters, accidents, public health incidents, and social security incidents that occur suddenly, cause or may cause serious social harm, and require emergency response measures. Examples include natural disasters such as the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake and Zhouqu mudslide; accidents like mining disasters, fires, radioactive contamination, and chemical pollution (e.g., the 2005 Songhua River pollution incident and the 2011 ConocoPhillips oil spill); social security incidents such as major criminal cases and mass incidents (e.g., the 9/11 at-

tacks and the July 5th incident in Xinjiang); and public health incidents like major animal epidemics and food safety events (e.g., the 2003 SARS outbreak and avian influenza). Public emergencies are characterized by sudden outbreak, urgent situations, unpredictable changes, severe harm, public interest concerns, and high social attention. In such contexts, public libraries should respond to new changes in public reading demands and actively explore crisis response strategies and service development pathways.

1. Theoretical Basis and Practical Functions of Reading Services in Public Emergencies

The reading services undertaken by libraries during public emergencies are not arbitrary but are supported by multiple theoretical frameworks including public goods theory and social responsibility theory, as well as relevant legal foundations.

1.1 Concept of Public Emergencies

Article 3 of China's Emergency Response Law defines public emergencies as events that occur suddenly, cause or may cause serious social harm, and require emergency response measures, including natural disasters, accidents, public health incidents, and social security incidents. The COVID-19 pandemic represents a typical major public health emergency.

1.2 Library Reading Services Based on Public Goods Theory

Reading services fall within the scope of public cultural services, and public goods theory provides the theoretical foundation for libraries to provide reading services during emergencies. Scholars have discussed public goods from various perspectives. From a supply perspective: "We define as public goods all those goods whose supply is determined not by individual market demand but by collective political choice—that is, any products and services that the government decides to provide free of charge or at low cost to users." Public goods can be categorized into material, service, and institutional forms. Reading promotion, information delivery, and information retrieval services provided by public libraries belong to the service form of public goods. The nature of public emergencies affects the supply of public goods. During the COVID-19 pandemic, governments provided strong guarantees for residents' basic living materials in addition to medical supplies. However, due to the special nature of the pandemic, most residents were required to reduce outdoor activities to prevent virus transmission. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, when one level of need is relatively satisfied, individuals pursue higher-level needs. Therefore, during the pandemic, information acquisition and reading services became public goods needed by the public.

1.3 Legal Basis for Library Social Responsibility

Western countries have explicit regulations regarding the social responsibilities of public facilities during emergencies. For example, Japanese law designates gymnasiums, libraries, parks, and schools as evacuation shelters after emergencies. Following Hurricane Katrina, U.S. states also enacted legislation addressing how libraries and other public spaces should respond to emergencies. Although Chinese law does not explicitly define the role of libraries in public emergencies, this does not mean the field is unregulated. Article 29 of the Emergency Response Law stipulates that “enterprises and institutions shall, in accordance with the requirements of local people’s governments and in light of their actual circumstances, carry out publicity and popularization activities on emergency knowledge and necessary emergency drills.” Article 38 of the Public Library Law requires that “public libraries shall announce their service content, opening hours, and borrowing rules to the public through their websites or other means.” Article 40 mandates that libraries “promote the use of digital and network technologies to provide convenient services to the public.” Article 16 of the Regulations on Open Government Information requires that “people’s governments at all levels shall set up government information access places in national archives and public libraries,” and that “administrative organs shall promptly provide actively disclosed government information to national archives and public libraries.” These regulations provide a legal basis for the functional positioning of public libraries during public emergencies.

1.4 Practical Functions Based on Social Responsibility

Regarding the social responsibilities libraries should undertake, the global library community has discussed this extensively for a long time. After public emergencies such as SARS, the Wenchuan earthquake, and H1N1 influenza, scholars and practitioners have repeatedly discussed libraries’ responsibilities and functions in cultural transmission, memory preservation, and research guidance. On September 8, 2019, President Xi Jinping stated in his reply to veteran experts at the National Library of China: “Libraries are important indicators of a country’s cultural development level and important venues for nourishing national spirit and cultivating cultural confidence. I hope the National Library will adhere to the correct political direction, promote excellent traditional culture, innovate service methods, promote nationwide reading, better meet people’s spiritual and cultural needs, and make new contributions to building China into a culturally strong country.” This statement clearly defines the social responsibilities and missions of public libraries. Accordingly, functions based on library social responsibility should include bridging the information gap, disseminating cultural knowledge, promoting social reading, continuing education, assisting vulnerable groups, and ensuring government information disclosure. In the context of major public emergencies, libraries’ social responsibilities should also include preserving crisis memories, addressing crisis issues, stabilizing the social environment, and providing social crisis education. For example, after the

Wenchuan earthquake, Chinese libraries actively participated in disaster relief and reconstruction while promoting disaster assistance knowledge and providing crisis information services, earning high social recognition.

2. Public Reading Needs During Public Emergencies

Public emergencies create an abnormal social environment, leading to new characteristics in public psychology and reading demands.

2.1 Information Acquisition Remains the Most Basic Reading Need

Public emergencies have complex social backgrounds and exhibit variability, diversity, harmfulness, and information scarcity during their development. Shortly after an emergency occurs, public attention to information surges, information network structures evolve rapidly, and information dissemination efficiency increases. Public reading purposes instantly focus on obtaining information, understanding response measures, and solving problems. However, the dynamic evolution of emergencies leads to massive, mixed, and difficult-to-verify information, with floods of unverified, false, or completely fake information causing confusion and triggering anxiety, speculation, and even pessimism among the public. During the COVID-19 pandemic, information about virus transmission routes circulated online, including claims of no human-to-human transmission, human-to-human transmission, contact transmission, airborne transmission, droplet transmission, and aerosol transmission, dramatically increasing the demand for factual information through reading. Statistics show that among Chinese adult internet users, 59.0% primarily engage in “reading news” online, and 30.3% mainly “searching for various types of information,” indicating growing emphasis on information acquisition functions. During public emergencies, obtaining authoritative information about the truth remains the public’s most basic reading need.

2.2 Surging Demand for Participatory Reading and Psychological Counseling

Public emergencies involve everyone’s vital interests. Excessive immediate concern for public safety leads to high psychological expectations for security measures and responses. Faced with many uncertainties, the public urgently needs social participation to build various connections that can alleviate fear. Research by Shi Wen and Huang Minggang shows that 31.5% of readers facing public emergencies feel “that we are all pitiable and unfortunate,” and 31.4% feel “powerless about current life.” However, in virtual environments constructed by information media, diverse information channels cannot build a stable “trust network.” According to surveys, 82% of respondents obtain emergency information through self-media platforms, while only 2% obtain it through announcements from social organizations. Conversely, 31% of respondents express distrust of

information disseminated on self-media platforms, and 78% indicate they are affected by false information. Information opacity is the root of fear. In emergency contexts, the public's normal life and work are disrupted, and relative spatial-temporal limitations lead to increased participation psychology. When reading news with relevance, narrative, and human interest, they feel more engaged and expect to establish emotional interaction with authors and news figures to achieve psychological counseling, demonstrating their social and communication needs.

2.3 Online Reading Becomes the Most Favored Method

With the rapid development and application of mobile internet and converged media technologies, online reading characterized by immediacy, massive volume, interactivity, and multimedia has become the main channel for public information reception, with digital reading via mobile terminals becoming increasingly popular. The 17th National Reading Survey found that mobile phones and the internet have become the main daily media for Chinese adults, with average daily mobile contact time of 100.41 minutes and internet contact time of 66.05 minutes. In 2019, the contact rate of digital reading methods among Chinese adults reached 79.3%, with increases in online reading, mobile reading, e-reader reading, and tablet reading. According to the 2020 WeChat Open Class PRO, monthly active WeChat accounts exceeded 1.15 billion in 2019, a 6% year-over-year increase. In the mobile internet media ecology, Weibo, WeChat, news clients, various communities, and short video platforms like Douyin, Kuaishou, and Miaopai increasingly compete for users' daily time. After public emergencies occur, as society operates in an abnormal environment, people prefer to read immediate, massive news information on mobile networks. Whether through "weak-tie" Weibo, "strong-tie" WeChat public platforms, or algorithm-based news clients like Toutiao, online reading has become the most favored method.

2.4 Coexistence of Fragmented Reading and Instant Dissemination

Compared with systematic in-depth reading, fragmented reading emphasizes "speed," "efficiency," and "essential content," pursuing short-term satisfaction of information needs. During public emergencies, public psychological panic triggers massive demand for information, particularly about causes, scale, progress, potential harm, and government measures, seeking fragmented, piecemeal, and browsing-style shallow reading through online terminals to quickly satisfy information needs. Meanwhile, the rise of social networks facilitates rapid information dissemination and distribution, with instant interactions such as liking, forwarding, and commenting accelerating information spread but potentially compromising objective truth for "communication" and "emotional expression" needs. This phenomenon was particularly extreme during COVID-19. After provinces activated Level I responses, residents required to stay at home increased online reading and instant communication, forming new public opinion fields on various media platforms through massive information aggregation.

2.5 Reading Needs Change with the Emergency Lifecycle

Public emergencies experience a complete lifecycle from emergence to resolution. Synthesizing various scholars' research, Cui Peng divides the lifecycle into incubation, outbreak, diffusion, repetition, decline, and long-tail stages, each with different evolution characteristics of online public opinion, while public reading needs also change accordingly. During the COVID-19 outbreak and rapid spread stage, readers in home quarantine focused intensely on pandemic-related science popularization and progress information, engaging in online fragmented reading while massively disseminating information instantly, creating an abnormal "panic" information flow. When the pandemic was effectively controlled, reading needs gradually expanded from pandemic-related information to life information, educational resources, and entertainment content. Simultaneously, as public libraries, database providers, publishers, and digital reading platforms opened relevant resources to the public free of charge, readers at home shifted from fragmented shallow reading to systematic, continuous deep reading. This change in reading psychology and demand is a dynamic gradual process rather than a fixed stereotype.

3. Reading Service Supply Strategies During Public Emergencies

Based on the changing characteristics of public reading needs and crisis response requirements during public emergencies, libraries should adjust their reading services accordingly and implement targeted scientific supply strategies.

3.1 Establish a Scientific Screening Mechanism for Emergency Information

As professional social and cultural institutions, public libraries should actively integrate into society, leverage rich information resources and professional talent reserves, and establish and improve scientific screening mechanisms for emergency information to support information authenticity and credibility. First, they should control "information sources" by resolutely rejecting media reports lacking factual basis and self-media articles with emotional inducement, and proactively collect, organize, and disseminate authoritative information from credible media. Second, they should transform "resources" by fully utilizing library platform advantages, collaborating with librarians, experts, scholars, teachers, and doctors for knowledge conversion, and deepening cooperation with external database providers, publishers, and digital reading platforms to create characteristic literature information services. Finally, they should refine "presentation" by focusing on processing, reorganizing, and deeply mining information resources, using multimedia forms for diversified audio-visual presentation, and establishing scientific reading guidance mechanisms with personalized language and humanistic care. During COVID-19, Huzhou Library promptly

established columns for science popularization, resource recommendation, and information announcements on its official website and WeChat public account, selecting information from authoritative media such as *People's Daily*, Xinhua News Agency, and CCTV for forwarding, editing, and processing, while collaborating with database providers to develop information resources. Through scientific screening and guidance mechanisms, the library strengthened the authority of pushed information and effectively enhanced its social recognition.

3.2 Strengthen Online Reading Promotion Services

After public emergencies occur, online reading services replace offline services as the “main arena.” During COVID-19, due to venue closures and cancellation of offline activities, major libraries increased online reading promotion through websites, WeChat public accounts, and mini-programs. The author selected WeChat public accounts of 10 public libraries in Hubei, Guangdong, and Zhejiang provinces (which had higher confirmed case numbers in the early outbreak) as samples, analyzing their reading service information pushes and readership from January to May 2020. The findings show that pushed content mainly included five aspects: (1) announcements, including opening hours, emergency notices, and explanations; (2) pandemic information, including development, prevention measures, and science popularization; (3) online reading promotion, including lectures, exhibitions, book talks, and digital resource promotion; (4) book and periodical recommendations; and (5) various reprints, such as high-quality articles from other public accounts. After the pandemic spread, all 10 sample libraries increased their supply of online reading promotion activities and pandemic information, with varying degrees of growth in both push volume and readership.

Taking January 20 (when the pandemic spread and attracted attention) as a node, the author collected data for 20 days before and after this date as independent samples. Statistics (see) show that during this period, among the 10 sample libraries, push volume increased by 25% overall (with Huzhou Library increasing by 120%), except for Guangdong Provincial Sun Yat-sen Library (a service account with push limitations) and Wuhan Library, which showed decreases. In terms of readership, all 10 libraries achieved growth, with an overall increase of 103%, among which Hubei Provincial Library increased by 462%.

As online reading tools are diverse and not constrained by library operating hours or borrowing procedures, they greatly expand readers' reading space and time. During its temporary closure, Huzhou Library established a dedicated online service team, planning nearly 50 series of online reading promotion activities integrating knowledge, interest, and interactivity, providing over 400,000 e-books, 562,000 audio resources, and 74,000 video resources to meet the learning and entertainment needs of different groups staying at home. Since the Spring Festival, Huzhou Library's digital resources have been accessed 325,500 times (a 25% year-over-year increase), with 114,300 document downloads (a 102% increase) and 80,500 e-book readings (a 155% increase).

3.3 Actively Provide Crisis-Responsive Thematic Services

Thematic services refer to service models that collect, screen, organize, and deliver information according to user needs, characterized by proactivity, targeting, and effectiveness. After public emergencies occur, libraries can timely collect information, compile materials, and release them through websites, Weibo, and WeChat platforms. They can also compile “response guides” for emergencies to guide public crisis preparation and provide decision-making information services for governments. In recent years, domestic libraries have achieved good results in thematic services for emergencies. For example, during the 2003 SARS outbreak, the Wuhan Branch of the National Science Library wrote special reports such as *Medical Institutions’ Response to Biological Attacks* and *Viruses and Viral Infectious Diseases*, and compiled reference materials including *The U.S. National Disease Surveillance System* and *SARS Detection Methods*. During COVID-19, Zhejiang Library, Wuhan Library, and Huzhou Library collaborated with online reading service providers like Ximalaya and Shuxiang China to publish *Novel Coronavirus Infection Protection* and *Novel Coronavirus Prevention Manual*. These thematic services have played positive roles in both helping the public respond scientifically to crises and providing references for government decision-making.

3.4 Emphasize Psychological Adjustment for Reader Groups

During public emergencies, public life and property are constantly threatened, and group psychology easily experiences anxiety and insecurity. Vulnerable groups with lower education levels, such as workers, commercial service personnel, farmers, and migrant workers, are particularly susceptible to pessimism and anxiety due to cognitive limitations and weaker risk resistance, potentially inducing psychological disorders. Therefore, while providing authoritative information, library reading services are also obligated to analyze essential issues, clarify thinking, and eliminate negative concepts about social justice and future expectations through information intervention and psychological counseling to help reader groups stabilize emotions and solve difficulties. During COVID-19, Huzhou Library launched a “Mental Health” column to help readers maintain emotional health and collaborated with local psychological assistance volunteer associations to provide timely psychological counseling services, helping citizens establish mental health and self-care awareness.

3.5 Collect Local Documentary Information

As public cultural facilities that collect, organize, preserve documentary information, and provide inquiry, borrowing, and related services free of charge to the public, public libraries’ important social responsibilities should include systematically collecting local documentary information to preserve and inherit local culture. After public emergencies occur, all sectors of society make tremendous efforts to respond to and handle the crisis, creating valuable historical memories. The resulting information and materials constitute important local literature.

Libraries should promptly integrate information and collect, organize, preserve, and develop local literature before, during, and after emergencies. They can hold exhibitions with peers after the event and jointly edit and publish relevant historical materials to provide information references for decision-makers and documentary resources for public research, effectively fulfilling their social responsibilities and functions. In early March, Huzhou Library jointly launched a “Anti-Epidemic” literature collection campaign with public libraries in its jurisdiction, collecting and organizing local documentary materials such as text, images, audio, video, and data that have historical value or special significance in Huzhou’s COVID-19 prevention and control efforts, preserving vivid historical details and valuable experience in social management and public health system construction, and fully undertaking the basic mission of local literature work in preserving history and informing governance.

In summary, in the specific context of public emergencies, public reading needs and behavioral habits exhibit new characteristics. Public library reading services should not only scientifically respond to crises and provide professional references for government decision-making and crisis management but also comprehensively consider changes in the social environment and audience psychological needs while innovating online reading promotion pathways in the new media era. This represents both an extension of basic library work and an important opportunity to exert public service functions and social value.

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Author Contributions

Liu Wei: Conceived the research idea, designed the study, and wrote the paper.

Jing Jingwen: Collected literature, organized and analyzed data, and revised the paper.

English Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Sudden public emergencies affect and change people's daily behaviors and habits. In abnormal environments, public reading demands, modes, and habits change accordingly, posing new challenges and requirements for library reading promotion services. **[Method/Process]** Based on related legal principles and academic theories, this paper discusses the responsibilities and functions carried by library reading services during public emergencies. Meanwhile, it puts forward specific supply strategies and feasible suggestions for reading services in light of the features of reading demands and behaviors of the public during the current "novel coronavirus pneumonia" epidemic situation. **[Result/Conclusion]** Libraries should select information of public emergencies scientifically, carry out crisis response consulting services, pay attention to the psychological adjustment of readers while improving the way of online reading, further enhancing functions and influences in dealing with sudden public emergencies.

Keywords: sudden public emergencies; COVID-19; library; reading service

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

Source: ChinaXiv — Machine translation. Verify with original.