

Civic Literacy and Resilient Society: A New Topic on Public Library Participation in Social Transformation (Postprint)

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Date: 2023-04-01T16:15:46+00:00

Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Whether a community is strong depends on the internal strength of its people—this internal strength is resilience. Resilience is the capacity to adapt to and respond to change. A resilient person not only possesses a sense of crisis and an open mindset, but also has the literacy to cope with change and solve problems. Library services not only subtly enhance public resilience literacy, but also provide them with a safe and comfortable space conducive to learning and exchange.

[Method/Process] Proceeding from the social context in which libraries are situated and its demands, this study focuses on three issues: resilience and sustainable development, the role of reading and information services in resilience cultivation, and resilient society and library development. By analyzing the social functions of libraries and their proper role in social development, especially in risk resistance, the connection between libraries and resilient society construction is further demonstrated, and countermeasures and suggestions that can be translated into concrete actions are proposed.

[Results/Conclusion] First, it is essential to fully recognize the significance of libraries conducting resilience literacy education, and to use this as an entry point to expand the development space for libraries to participate in and integrate into society. Libraries should be oriented toward social needs, extending various related services to society, families, and individuals. Libraries should not only carry out resilience literacy education, but also create favorable conditions for the public to enhance information literacy, media literacy, technical literacy, and professional literacy, and provide them with harmonious and safe spaces for sharing and communication. Second, efforts should be made to innovate resilience literacy education activities and develop new service projects. While continuing to conduct reading promotion activities, libraries should also effectively apply the successful experiences and best practices accumulated in

reading promotion to resilience literacy activities, and through participation in community resilience construction, expand new spaces and new skills for library services in the community. Finally, it is necessary to vigorously enhance libraries' ability to respond to various risks and crises and the resilience literacy of librarians themselves. Libraries should establish a comprehensive security concept and crisis management awareness, strengthening their ability to resist various risks and crises. The process of resilience literacy education is also a process of self-learning and self-training for librarians; this opportunity should be firmly grasped to strive to serve the construction of a resilient society with stronger and more steadfast professional resilience.

Full Text

Introduction

In recent years, the term “strong” has frequently been heard in international library circles. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) designated “Strong Libraries, Strong Societies” as its theme for 2013-2015. Then-IFLA President Sinikka Sipilä emphasized in promoting this theme that libraries truly achieve the goal of “strong libraries, strong societies” only when they are perceived by their user communities as warm, safe places with appropriate spaces and catalogs, staffed by professional, dedicated, and helpful librarians, and providing timely resources including digital content that meets users' needs. Libraries must effectively communicate to their constituencies the contributions they should make not only to the cultural environment but also to economic, educational, and social life. A strong society is one that is open, free, and equitable, where people can utilize their knowledge, abilities, and skills to serve themselves, their families, and their communities—this forms the very foundation of socioeconomic development [1].

The American Library Association (ALA) further designated “Libraries = Strong Communities” as the theme for National Library Week (April 7-13, 2019). ALA President Loida Garcia-Febo emphasized in launching the “Libraries = Strong Communities” advocacy campaign: “Through nationwide tours and promotions, we must awaken public awareness of the value of libraries and librarians, and build strong momentum supporting libraries at local, state, national, and global levels” [2]. She also noted: “In this era of political and social conflict, libraries across America will continue to play important roles in education and lifelong learning, providing resources and expertise to promote civic engagement and transform lives.”

Both leaders' statements focus on the relationship between libraries and communities, highlighting the significance of resilience for libraries and communities. Society as a whole faces challenges from crises, risks, and uncertainties. In building resilient societies and communities, libraries must not only play important roles but also maintain their relevance to social development while contributing to social stability and progress by providing safe and reliable public spaces,

useful resources and tools, and various literacies needed by the public.

This paper examines libraries' social functions and their roles in social development, particularly in risk resistance, from the perspective of libraries' social context and needs. It focuses on three issues: resilience and sustainable development, the role of reading and information services in resilience cultivation, and resilient society and library development. Through analysis of libraries' social functions and their proper roles in social development—especially in resisting risks—the paper demonstrates the connection between libraries and resilient society construction, emphasizing that libraries should actively participate in building resilient societies and leverage their professional strengths and resource advantages to enhance citizens' comprehensive qualities.

1 Resilience and Sustainable Development

Resilience is a hot topic in the international community, representing “the ability of systems, enterprises, and individuals to maintain core functions and integrity in dramatically changing environments.” In 1973, American ecologist C.S. Holling introduced this concept into ecosystem stability research, defining it as the capacity of a system to absorb disturbances and continue maintaining its functions, structure, and feedback without qualitative change [3]. Domestically, some scholars translated it as “recovery 力” (recovery power). In 2007, Sun Jing, Wang Jun, and Yang Xinjun from Northwest University published “A Review of Social-Ecological System Resilience Research,” providing comprehensive analysis of resilience [4]. Later, resilience research expanded from ecology to urban safety, urban construction, and social development. The global “Resilience Alliance,” established in 1999, comprises scholars and managers from ecology, economics, sociology, archaeology, and other fields [5].

On April 15, 2013, *Study Times* published an article by Andrew Zolli and Ann Marie Healy titled “Resilience: The Bedrock of Sustainable Development.” The article emphasized that while details of crises and events vary widely, they share significant commonalities—namely, interconnectedness. The authors proposed: “If we cannot control unpredictable waves, we can learn to build better boats. We can design and reconstruct organizations, institutions, and systems to better withstand disruption, apply to broader contexts, and more smoothly adapt to circumstances.” This makes resilience particularly important. Resilience is key to sustainable development and superior to sustainability approaches that pursue equilibrium. The article argued that resilience thinking provides a broader, more flexible, and more pertinent set of concepts, tools, and methods [6].

Another concept related to resilience is anti-fragility. In 2014, CITIC Press published the Chinese translation of Nassim Nicholas Taleb's *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder* [7]. Taleb argued that anti-fragility is a strength that actively responds to rather than passively copes with uncertainty, finding order within chaotic environments. He contrasted this with resilience, suggesting anti-fragility transcends resilience: while resilience enables resistance and recovery,

anti-fragility makes things better. Using the metaphor of the phoenix and the hydra, Taleb explained that the phoenix reborn from flames remains a phoenix, whereas the hydra grows two heads when one is cut off—growing from nine to eighteen heads when continuously attacked, representing typical anti-fragility. He argued that anti-fragile phenomena exist everywhere in biology, nature, and human society—human bones strengthen under weight and pressure, just as rumors and riots intensify when suppressed. Many things benefit from stress, chaos, fluctuation, and turmoil.

Today, the international community widely accepts “resilience” as the appropriate term. Resilience is not simple defense but adaptive capacity to diverse changes—the key is “adaptive governance” capability. We previously used band-aid solutions, but numerous crisis cases demonstrate that crises comprise multiple complex factors requiring “forward-looking” solutions that employ adaptive governance to address multifaceted crises. Resilience differs from disaster prevention: the latter emphasizes specific risks and countermeasures, while resilience analyzes all risks to propose comprehensive security concepts and integrated countermeasures, focusing on whole-process, all-dimensional (across fields), and whole-population participation. It requires both forward-positioned risk prevention mechanisms and horizontal coordination engaging all stakeholders to form a comprehensive prevention and response system. As social institutions, libraries must participate in urban comprehensive security systems, playing regulatory and stabilizing roles in mitigating and overcoming risk factors.

2 Reading, Literacy, and Resilience Cultivation

Resilience has become a hot term because crises have become frequent worldwide in recent years, with rising uncertainties rendering passive prevention and response approaches inadequate. Early resilience concerns focused on disaster prevention, safety, and natural/ecological environments, later expanding to political, economic, and socio-cultural fields. Here, we primarily explore socio-cultural dimensions. A resilient society comprises resilient individuals and communities; citizen and social resilience determine regional resilience. Therefore, resilient society depends not only on regional administrators’ leadership but also on public tenacity.

Scholars note that resilience is the ability to adapt to and cope with change [8]. Resilient individuals share common characteristics: crisis awareness (believing crises are ubiquitous but surmountable), open-mindedness, flexible adaptation, strong control, problem-solving skills, social competence, positive energy (strong survival instinct rather than passive victimhood), and knowing how to seek help [9]. Community resilience has become a focus because “communities are the first line of impact for any disaster, large or small” and “if communities are the frontline of direct disaster impact, their recovery resilience is also key to saving lives” [10]. Community strength depends on its people; community resilience strength depends on citizen quality.

What contributions can libraries make to resilience cultivation? Undoubtedly, primarily through reading and information services. Reading enhances not only survival and work skills but also spiritual cultivation and problem-solving inspiration. In a report titled *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence*, National Endowment for the Arts Chairman Dana Gioia stated: “Regardless of circumstances, reading changes lives. In fact, frequent readers not only achieve greater academic and economic success but also enhance social responsibility and civic consciousness. Literary reading particularly enriches emotions and fosters innovative and creative spirit.” The report indicated that literary readers visit museums, attend theater, listen to music, and create their own works at three times the rate of non-literary readers [11]. The purpose of nationwide reading initiatives is to advocate reading, subtly cultivating readers’ comprehension of issues, creativity in problem-solving and innovation, and tenacity in resisting risks and crises. This tenacity—resilience—is an internal strength. Society’s strength depends on its citizens’ internal strength. Libraries not only continuously cultivate resilient individuals but also provide safe, comfortable spaces for learning and exchange.

The Aspen Institute, in collaboration with the Colorado State Library and Houston Public Library, published *Libraries: Building Community Resilience in Colorado* and *The Great Opportunity: Houston Public Library’s Role in Building Community, Equity, and Innovation*. The latter proposed six recommendations: (1) view libraries as trusted information sources; (2) utilize library infrastructure to enhance financial literacy and empowerment; (3) promote communication and cooperation among communities; (4) strengthen effective collaboration through portfolio approaches; (5) connect libraries with schools’ social work; and (6) use libraries as social infrastructure to facilitate exchanges between citizens and student groups [12].

In July 2019, I spoke at the 17th China-Europe Round Table “Urban Culture and Technological Innovation” meeting, presenting data on Shanghai’s cultural development: in scientific literacy, Shanghai citizens reached 21.88% in 2018, ranking first nationally—exceeding US 1999 levels (17.3%) and EU 2005 levels (13.8%) [13]; in public cultural services, Shanghai has 243 public libraries, 238 cultural centers and mass art centers, and 213 museums and art galleries, with per capita book borrowing of 1.35 volumes in 2017, and has basically established a 15-minute public cultural service circle [14]. These data demonstrate that a city’s strength depends on its citizens’ internal strength—resilience. With this resilience, no risk or uncertainty is insurmountable. I particularly emphasized: “Today, judging whether a city is developed cannot depend solely on industrial development but on whether both industry and culture are excellent. Only when both are excellent is a city truly strong” [15]. Shanghai’s real driving force lies in its citizens’ learning capacity, creativity, and tenacity, enriched by cultural and scientific literacy—knowledge gained through learning, exchange, and interaction transforms into powerful momentum for technological and economic development.

3 Resilient Society Construction and Library Development

Society now faces growing disaster threats such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and energy and food security issues, requiring strategies to enhance resilience. Scholars note that libraries should play important roles in such social strategies [16]. On one hand, society's center of gravity for risk resistance and crisis management has shifted to communities; on the other hand, as a basic public service rooted in communities, libraries should naturally contribute to resilient society construction. Therefore, since the beginning of this century, the library profession has gradually initiated innovations related to resilient society construction.

Libraries have long emphasized disaster prevention and mitigation. In 2005, 168 countries adopted the Hyogo Framework for Action at the World Conference on Disaster Reduction, establishing 2005-2015 global disaster reduction strategic goals and action priorities. It emphasized integrating disaster reduction concepts into sustainable development actions, strengthening disaster reduction system construction, developing early warning systems, improving disaster reduction capacity, and reducing reconstruction-phase risks [17]. This established a comprehensive security strategy extending disaster prevention work to community grassroots levels. In March 2015, the UN adopted the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, endorsed by 187 countries, expanding its focus to health and hygiene and emphasizing human health and well-being as common issues for disaster risk reduction, climate change, and sustainable development [18]. IFLA followed closely, publishing *Disaster Risk Response: Libraries and the Sendai Framework* in April 2018, arguing that libraries have responsibility to protect cultural heritage and ensure public access to inform and inspire future generations. Although libraries already have various disaster prevention and mitigation plans, much work remains, such as providing health information services to community residents. Libraries serve as secondary emergency service institutions (after medical and fire services), providing functions such as charging stations, network access, and evacuation facilities. The framework calls on libraries to contribute to cultural heritage protection as an important component of cultural resilience [19].

In 2013, Michael Dudley published *Public Libraries and Resilient Cities* in the United States, discussing from urban planning and design perspectives how public libraries contribute to urban economic, cultural, and environmental development. He emphasized that libraries are pillars of resilient cities and keystone institutions for urban prosperity—a source of reason, insight, wisdom, and inspiration. As a public service, libraries should serve as social equalizers enhancing citizens' risk-resolution capacity [20]. Additionally, Dan Grace and Babara Sen, in *Community Resilience and the Role of the Public Library*, applied Ivan Illich's theory of educational tools to emphasize that libraries are convivial institutions where resources and tools are freely and readily available for anyone to achieve self-defined goals [16]. These perspectives demonstrate that as social equalizers, public libraries can contribute to resilient society con-

struction across economic, social, and cultural dimensions. Dudley’s book has significantly influenced global librarianship, with many Chinese scholars citing it, though attention to and research on resilience itself seems insufficient.

In 2016, the UK Arts Council published *Envisioning the Library of the Future*, also emphasizing that libraries should treat vocational training as an important component of resilience literacy education and specifically propose services for cultivating individual resilience and adaptability [21]. Some regional library associations actively encourage member institutions in this work. For example, the New York Library Association (NYLA) offered specific suggestions for library participation in community resilience building, such as organizing workshops, identifying community-related issues, participating in community strategy and partnership planning, and developing programs like financial literacy, DIY initiatives, and cultural inclusion [22].

Other libraries have developed art activities for vulnerable groups. From July 13 to September 19, 2019, the San Francisco Public Library held a “Creating Resilience” exhibition on its third floor, organized by a local transitional-age youth care program showcasing how young artists from the Larkin neighborhood enhanced their resilience through artistic efforts. The library used such activities to inspire homeless transitional-age youth to find employment [23]. Additionally, Hangzhou Library’s reading therapy project jointly launched with Hangzhou Youth League Committee and the 12355 Youth Service Hotline [24], and Hong Kong’s Chai Wan Public Library’s “Stress Relief and Resilience Series: Understanding Music Therapy” [25] have greatly benefited readers’ resilience cultivation. Such resilience literacy education-themed activities will likely become widespread in libraries in the coming period.

Whether a city or community is strong depends on its citizens’ internal strength—resilience. Resilience is the capacity to adapt to and cope with change. Resilient individuals possess not only crisis awareness and open-mindedness but also the qualities to address change and solve problems. Libraries not only subtly cultivate resilient people but also provide safe, comfortable spaces for learning and exchange. Therefore, the following recommendations are proposed:

First, fully recognize the significance of libraries conducting resilience literacy education and use this as an entry point to expand libraries’ space for social participation and integration. Public libraries’ mission includes enhancing citizens’ various literacies for social adaptation. While early library services focused on literacy, modern society’s demands require more. Libraries must be demand-driven, extending relevant services to society, families, and individuals. Beyond resilience literacy education, libraries should create favorable conditions for improving information literacy, media literacy, technical literacy, and professional literacy, providing harmonious, safe spaces for sharing and communication.

Second, actively innovate resilience literacy education activities and develop new service projects. Libraries have long been committed to reading promo-

tion, accumulating considerable effective experience. While continuing reading promotion, libraries should apply these successful experiences and best practices to resilience literacy activities. By participating in community resilience building, libraries can expand new spaces and develop new skills for community service.

Third, vigorously enhance libraries' capacity to handle various risks and crises and improve librarians' own resilience literacy. Like society, libraries face various crises and risks. They must establish comprehensive security consciousness and crisis management awareness to strengthen resistance to all kinds of crises and risks. The process of resilience literacy education is also one of self-learning and training for librarians, who should seize this opportunity to devote themselves to resilient society construction with stronger, more solid professional resilience.

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