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Upholding Fundamentals while Innovating: On User-Rooted Literature Processing Postprints

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] This paper explores issues of upholding tradition while innovating in the discipline from a user-centered, service-oriented perspective. [Methods/Process] It elaborates from two aspects: users' basic needs and providing precise services to users. [Results/Conclusion] Libraries should guide social reading, recommend books to the public, conduct in-depth processing of literature, and facilitate readers' utilization of literature.

Full Text

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Keeping the Right Path and Innovating: On User-Centered Document Processing

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Abstract: [Purpose/Significance] Taking users as the foundation and service as the fundamental principle, this paper discusses the issue of keeping the right path and innovating in library science. [Method/Process] It elaborates from two aspects: basic user needs and providing precise services to users. [Result/Conclusion] Libraries should guide social reading, recommend books to society, and also carry out in-depth processing of documents to provide convenience for readers in utilizing documents.

Keywords: Recommended reading; Precision service; Unit information; Functional information

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The year 2020 marked the 100th anniversary of library science education in China. Wuhan University invited me to contribute an article, for which I wrote “The Eternal Luojia Mountain.” On this centennial occasion, Nanjing University’s School of Information Management organized a symposium on library science education, which holds great significance. Several years ago, scholars such as Cheng Huanwen, Chu Jingli, Ke Ping, and Wang Yuguang discussed the pioneers of library science education, mentioning Liu Guojun, Pi Gaopin, and other scholars whose erudition was exceptionally high—beyond what we can compare with today.

Several years ago, when I was teaching at Beijing Normal University, department heads discussing discipline construction and core curricula proposed making computer science, mathematics, and foreign languages core courses. While I acknowledged these subjects are important, I argued they are not the core of our profession. They can be studied for two or three years, but should not be listed as core courses. Twenty years ago, this represented a fundamental issue in library science research and a basic problem in library services. Today, we reiterate the importance of “keeping the right path” because our research has left behind the “soul” of the discipline. I once asked Professors Ke Ping and Zheng Jianming whether they still offered bibliography courses. They replied that they did, but many departments had eliminated such courses, and the names had disappeared. We are losing the essential skills of library science—not just bibliography, but knowledge points from other courses as well.

Based on this understanding, this paper discusses keeping the right path and innovating rooted in users, along with document processing issues. Although these are fundamental problems, I believe they should be reiterated because they represent “keeping the right path.”

2. On Users’ Basic Needs

The fundamental point of library science or library work should be the user. Users are paramount; they are everything. Ensuring basic services for users is a responsibility. Wuhan University Professor Wu Dan leads a major National Social Science Fund project that integrates digital resources from three major public digital culture projects of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. Additionally, the Ministry has launched public cultural demonstration zone construction, with over 100 prefecture-level demonstration zones already established, aiming to ensure basic services—a fundamental responsibility.

This paper discusses several practical issues from the library perspective, hoping to provide references for discipline construction. First, the “right path” is the root and soul of a discipline. The “right path” means being user-centered

and service-oriented—rooted in users. “Keeping the right path” means never forgetting our original aspiration: serving society and serving users.

More than 500 publishers in China publicly release over 400,000 book titles annually, with tens of thousands of newspapers and journals in circulation. Digital resources (taking the three major public digital culture projects as examples) amount to 22,414 TB. According to 2019 surveys, the national average annual book reading per capita is 4.5 titles, and digital resources 7.8 titles. Faced with these numbers, what are users to do? From the user’s perspective, they are at a loss, confused, wandering in a fog without direction. To guide social reading, the Chinese Library Association established the Science Popularization and Reading Guidance Committee. Professor Wang Yuguang edited “Thirty Books That Influenced Chinese History.” The Wenjin Book Award selects 10 titles annually from hundreds of thousands of books published by 500 publishers nationwide, aiming to pick valuable works from this ocean of books. Various regions have also launched citizen reading bibliographies, with Capital Library publishing an annual citizen reading list. Shenzhen’s Futian District “One Room Library” features an elderly gentleman who specializes in studying books, recommending and explaining one title regularly—an excellent initiative.

We should accomplish something meaningful while keeping the right path by processing documents with high quality. Two historical examples illustrate this: first, the class prefaces and abstracts in Liu Xiang and Liu Xin’s “Seven Summaries” and “Separate Records.” The class prefaces represent the intellectual history and academic history of a category, beautifully written. The abstracts provide the gist and merits of a work. Fewer than 10 such pieces survive today, yet everyone praises them. The “Siku Quanshu General Catalog” is revered as a classic not only in library science but also in literature, historiography, textual criticism, and bibliography for its ability to “distinguish academic fields and examine intellectual origins.” When guiding graduate students, Mr. Gu Tinglong designated it as a graduate textbook. Professors Qi Gong and Liu Naihe at Beijing Normal University also listed it as a textbook for textual criticism, representing the scholarly achievement of having read extensively throughout the world. Zhang Zhidong wrote eloquently that after reading these abstracts, one can “find the right entry point and achieve twice the result with half the effort.” Although Lu Xun had objections to the “Siku Quanshu General Catalog,” he had to admit that those who truly wanted knowledge could benefit from reading it. Only with such extensive reading as a foundation could one write such abstracts.

In the 1980s, Mr. Cai Shangsi’s “Essentials of Chinese Cultural History” began with over 100 book titles but, after careful deliberation, finally recommended 20 works he believed best represented Chinese culture. The 1920s and 1930s saw a recommended bibliography movement. To contribute to Wang Yuguang’s “Dictionary of Chinese Reading,” I found nearly a thousand bibliographies compiled during that period during a holiday and wrote abstracts for each. In the 1980s, scholars like Wang Yao (“Q&A on Li Bai Bibliography”) and Tang Guizhang

(“Essential Reading List for Studying Song Ci”) produced recommended reading lists centered on their lifelong research disciplines, providing highly readable guidance that pointed the way for students and society.

Today, the responsibility of ensuring basic services includes at least three tasks:

2.1 Classic Recommendations

Mr. Cai selected 20 titles from 80,000 books published before 1911, arguing these 20 works are essential for Chinese culture—without reading them, one cannot claim to be a cultured Chinese person. The advocacy for building a harmonious society and promoting nationwide reading has been included in the government work report six times. We should organize people from all walks of life to jointly accomplish this construction task. Although our own reading and scholarly level may not suffice, we can leverage social forces. Libraries should play an organizational role, recommending books at all levels and for different groups. For the general public, this means rooting nationwide information literacy education in social needs, requiring both government leadership (for example, Beijing Municipal Party Committee’s Propaganda Department is organizing the compilation of Beijing’s 2021-2035 Reading Plan) and professional guidance (from various disciplines) with social participation. For specialized research, recommendations should come from doctoral and master’s supervisors in university departments—scholars with academic training, judgment, and a sense of responsibility. First-class literature can influence a person’s life, stimulating creativity and imagination. Mr. Yu Guangyuan told me several times that his real university was the library, for which he was deeply grateful. When Peking University celebrated its centennial, scholars including Yuan Xingpei compiled a list of 30 essential books for students.

The commentary here must not be empty or merely a list of titles, nor should it be like the dish name “ants climbing a tree,” which sounds appealing but reveals nothing about its contents. As Jin Kaicheng wrote in a newspaper, “ants climbing a tree” is sesame fried with vermicelli—without explanation, who knows if it’s worth 30 yuan? Commentary is essential. I recall writing an article in the 1980s for *Guangming Daily* arguing that published books need abstracts. At Xidan Bookstore, I observed many readers picking up books and putting them down, unable to decide without abstracts. Today, we must provide commentary, explaining the reasons, quality, and key points. While we may not reach the level of Liu Xiang, Liu Xin, or Ji Xiaolan, we should strive. I remember Mr. He Qifang saying, “I dare not write a single word without reading something three times.” We must thoroughly study books before making recommendations to readers.

2.2 Precise Guidance

Precise guidance means arousing the national desire to read. The 2019 national reading rate was 59%, with some hoping to raise it to 80%. Achieving this would

significantly improve social harmony, well-being, and cultural cultivation. Many people wander through libraries like “sheep grazing,” reading in bookstores without direction. In reality, society has latent and vague needs that require our guidance. How to guide? We should mobilize social forces, and libraries should find ways to arouse public reading desire. Libraries nationwide have already done much work: reading days, reading months, reading seasons, book festivals, “Opening Books is Beneficial” (for individuals), “Poetry and Books Passed Down in Families” (for families), “City of Reading” (for cities), and “Scholarly China” (for the nation). The National Library invited me to lecture on “Health and Reading” for western regions, but due to the pandemic this year, I delivered it online, guiding people to read well during the pandemic. Reading is everyone’s responsibility—not only ours but also various media outlets with social responsibilities. CCTV’s Bai Yansong also recommends reading, and cities have reading promotion ambassadors.

The 2019 World Media Conference proposed three concepts: mobile-first, content is king, and user-centric. We have resources—abundant digital resources that should be carefully selected and pushed via mobile platforms to guide users. With 850 million netizens, these people can read on their phones without visiting libraries. Another issue is that public and university libraries are not proactive enough, leaving many information resources undifferentiated on their interfaces. Resources on tourism, health, cooking, parenting, and other topics, built with substantial funding—such as the Ministry of Culture and Tourism’s sharing project, for which I participate in annual reviews of local characteristic resource construction—are excellent and should be visible to the public. Libraries must find ways to make these accessible with one click.

3. On Users’ Precise Services

In document services, there is a “principle of least effort,” which refers to spending the minimal time and energy to find ideal resources in literature. In service, we should put ourselves in users’ shoes and consider their needs. I have experienced this: intending to write an article, but after reading several pieces, the creative desire disappears. We must provide in-depth services that inspire users. Current document information processing mostly focuses on superficial or holistic aspects.

Present document provision services include: describing external document characteristics to provide sources for searchers; revealing overall document information to provide content summaries; processing terms within documents to provide peripheral information; studying document content characteristics to provide reference decision-making information; and linking related document information to provide networked associations.

From today’s information environment and user needs perspective, we must acknowledge many shortcomings in information processing. Past practices have emphasized academic research over practical development, providing clues over

substantive information, holistic processing over unit information screening, and document-centric over user-centric approaches.

In precise services, at least two areas of work are possible:

3.1 Provision of Unit Information

This is an information processing issue. What is unit information? It refers to those statements within original documents—viewpoints, methods, data, conclusions—that have reference and citation value and are ultimately what users need in practice when writing articles and books. A 7,000-word article is mostly water; only a small portion is truly useful, and some articles contain nothing valuable at all. We must select fragments that are innovative, academic, and accurate to achieve practicality and completeness. Standing from a disciplinary height to select and read literature fulfills the “least effort” service. If we establish a unit information database for each discipline, we can serve researchers in that discipline—this is something we should consider.

3.2 Provision of Functional Information

What is functional information? It refers to information with development value hidden within documents. For example, I taught a “Document Retrieval Course” for over 20 years. When discussing yearbooks, their function is to look up real-time statistical data, but deep within, each yearbook can yield hundreds of functional terms. Another example is the dozen appendices at the back of *Cihai*—most people only know it as a dictionary for looking up words but don’t know it also contains historical chronologies. Many reference books contain such hidden information, which we call functional terms or functional roles that we must extract. Functional information processing takes complete unit information within documents as objects, conducting functional term indexing page by page, paragraph by paragraph, and unit by unit from the first page. Functional terms can be existing unit information in the document or can be formulated based on the central content of a paragraph, then forming a functional information database and retrieval system. This is how we consider issues from the user needs perspective.

These two processing methods offer a shortcut for eliminating information noise, accelerating information exchange, and meeting users’ “least effort” needs. From the perspective of bibliography, this not only creates new information but also endows original information with new value, perfecting the information processing system with an information evaluation function that solves users’ difficulties in utilizing documents.

Keeping Positive Innovation—Exploration on the Document Processing Rooted in Users

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Abstract: [Purpose/significance] Taking users as the foundation, taking the service as the fundamental, this paper discussed the issue of positive innovation of library science. [Method/process] It explained from two aspects: basic user needs and providing precise service to users. [Result/conclusion] As a library, it should guide the society to read, recommend books to the society, and also carry out in-depth processing of documents to provide convenience for readers to use documents.

Keywords: recommended reading; precision service; unit information; functional information

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

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