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An Analysis of U.S. Public Library Services from an Equalization Perspective: Current Status and Implications (Postprint)

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Date: 2023-07-26T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] This study analyzes the current development status of American public libraries from an equalization perspective, identifies their implications for the equalization development of China's public libraries, and aims to provide reference for the equalization development of public library services in China.

[Method/Process] Through interpretation of the "2018 State of America's Libraries Report" and web-based investigation, the current state of American public libraries is analyzed from three dimensions: diversified equality of service audiences, universal literacy education, and sustainability of service resources.

[Results/Conclusion] It is proposed that China's public libraries should draw upon advanced foreign experiences, emphasize demand-oriented approaches, strengthen services for vulnerable groups, prioritize universal literacy education, adhere to sustainable development principles, and enhance librarians' capabilities in equalization services, thereby advancing the equalization level of public library services in China.

Full Text

Preamble

Volume 63, Issue 6, March 2019

ChinaXiv Cooperative Journal

Analysis and Enlightenment on the Current Situation of Public Library Services in the United States from the Perspective of Equalization

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] This paper analyzes the current development of public libraries in the United States from an equalization perspective, identifies its implications for the equalization development of public libraries in China, and aims to provide reference for promoting equalized public library services in China. **[Method/Process]** Based on an interpretation of *The State of America's Libraries 2018* and supplementary network research, this study examines the status of American public libraries from three aspects: diversified and equal service audiences, national literacy education, and sustainable service resources. **[Result/Conclusion]** The paper proposes that Chinese public libraries should learn from advanced foreign experiences by focusing on demand-oriented services, strengthening services for vulnerable groups, emphasizing national literacy education, following sustainable development principles, and enhancing librarians' equalization service capabilities, thereby advancing the equalization level of public library services in China.

Keywords: public library; equalization; United States; library services

Classification Number: G250

DOI: 10.13266/j.issn.0252-3116.2019.06.015

Introduction

As early as 1948, the United States *Library Bill of Rights* emphasized the freedom and equal development of libraries. In 1994, UNESCO's second revision of the *Public Library Manifesto* stated that public library services are based on equal access, providing services to all people regardless of age, race, gender, religious belief, nationality, language, or social status [1]. On March 1, 2017, China's State Council announced the *13th Five-Year Plan for Promoting the Equalization of Basic Public Services*, which clearly stated that to achieve the goal of equalizing basic public services, efforts must be made to strengthen public cultural services, deepen the free access to public libraries, promote the main-branch library system centered on county-level cultural centers and libraries, and advance equalized public library services [2].

What is equalization? Domestic scholars mostly understand it from perspectives such as equal opportunity and roughly equal outcomes, believing that equalization does not mean averaging, but rather ensuring that all citizens enjoy services above a certain standard while acknowledging differences among regions, urban and rural areas, and population groups [3]. Public library service equalization refers to public libraries providing equal services to the public without discrimination based on age, race, gender, religion, nationality, language, or social status, achieving comprehensive equalization in service objects, resource allocation, and service systems [4], enabling everyone to equally access and utilize

public library resources and services.

Many Chinese scholars have researched public library service equalization. For instance, Li Guoxin and Zhang Yong pointed out that since the 12th Five-Year Plan, the “central region depression” phenomenon has emerged in China’s public library development, with low equalization service levels being one of its manifestations [5]. Hu Kun used the analytic hierarchy process to construct an evaluation system for public library service equalization to study regional differences and spatial distribution patterns [6]. Li Xiaohui investigated the current situation and problems of equalized services in Dongguan Library’s public service system and proposed solutions [7]. Yan Beini and Xie Hejia interpreted the current situation of equalized services in Hong Kong public libraries from management structure, regional distribution, and reader services to provide reference for mainland public libraries [8]. Liu Honghui stated that service equalization is the mission of urban public libraries and proposed construction paths for Guangzhou’s urban public library service system [9]. Scholars’ attention reflects China’s emphasis on public library service equalization. As equalization of public cultural services has gradually become a key development focus for various countries, public libraries, as the main front and backbone of public cultural services, play a pivotal role in the process of equalizing public cultural services.

On April 9, 2018, the American Library Association (ALA) released *The State of America’s Libraries 2018* (hereinafter referred to as “the Report”), which highly affirmed the value and role of libraries in American social development. The Report is divided into five main sections, including academic libraries, school libraries, public libraries, events and developments, and national actions and future trends. As an important report reflecting the development status of American libraries over the past year, it presents the current service development level and future trends of various types of libraries and has significant reference value for library development in the United States and globally. Although some scholars have compared the equalization services of Chinese and American public libraries, their research mainly conducted comparative analysis from macro perspectives of service objects, service resources, and service systems. In recent years, American public library equalization services have continuously developed and improved, and in-depth analysis of their specific measures and concepts can help us better understand the connotation and implementation approaches of equalization services. Therefore, this study interprets the Report from an equalization perspective and combines it with network research to analyze the service status of American public libraries, aiming to provide reference for the equalization development of public library services in China.

2. American Public Library Services from the Equalization Perspective

American public libraries have a well-developed network, including national libraries with rich collections and diverse functions, as well as state libraries,

municipal libraries, and small community libraries [10]. In terms of service provision, these libraries consider audiences of all ages and races, and play a key role in promoting national literacy education and advancing sustainable library development.

2.1 Diversified and Equal Service Audiences

2.1.1 Children's Services Children's services are a hallmark of American public libraries, with rich content and distinctive features. The Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), as the leading organization for children's library services, aims to enable all children to access knowledge. Through network research on ALSC, we found that ALSC believes children's information needs are extensive, and every child has the right to experience joy, creativity, attention, and recognition. ALSC has made outstanding efforts in promoting children's book reading and digital media usage. In September 2016, ALSC received its seventh year of funding from the Dollar General Literacy Foundation. The ALSC board decided to use these funds for public library summer learning and after-school programs to positively impact children's related learning. Additionally, ALSC has identified children's media usage guidance as a priority development area. As more people focus on children's digital media usage and media literacy, ALSC is actively cooperating with public libraries. In 2017, the National Association for Media Literacy Education and the Erikson Institute invited several ALSC members to attend their conference on children and digital media to discuss public library children's media research findings and usage guidance services [11].

Librarians are the main providers of public library children's services. The Brookings Institution has referred to librarians as "special social workers and navigators" who can "help local people understand the multifaceted nature of life." This role becomes particularly prominent and important during crisis events such as natural disasters and school shootings. For example, in October 2017, when wildfires broke out in Northern California, many young victims lost their homes and were left in unfamiliar environments. Public librarians in San Rafael, California immediately joined rescue efforts, telling stories to these young victims and doing crafts and playing games with them. Students from the University of Washington's Library and Information Science program also created a "Public Library Youth Services Planning in Times of Crisis" program to help children remain rational and improve safety awareness when facing crisis events.

2.1.2 Youth Services In 2017, American public libraries invested more effort in youth services, striving to meet various needs of young people and address serious social problems they face. A survey of staff from American national library institutions focusing on youth services showed that barriers to providing youth services in public libraries mainly come from two aspects: funding and librarian capacity. Specifically, 88.5% of respondents pointed out that lack of

funding is the main obstacle to meeting youth service needs, while inability to provide continuing education opportunities for library staff is another important aspect.

To address funding issues, some American public libraries have used grants from various sources to provide services that meet current youth needs. For instance, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) funded the “Washington Area Library Shared Project” and the “Rhode Island Public Library Project,” enabling public libraries in these regions to better serve youth. Additionally, facing obstacles caused by insufficient federal funding for improving youth library services, 79.5% of Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) members expressed willingness to participate in activities supporting local initiative funding.

Regarding librarian continuing education, YALSA passed a funding plan participated by IMLS called the “National Continuing Education Plan for Youth Services,” specifically funding librarians for continuing education to enhance their ability to serve youth. Meanwhile, YALSA published the book *The Teen Services Competencies for Library Staff*, outlining the knowledge, skills, and qualities required for library staff to effectively serve youth, and drafted *The National Research Agenda: Libraries, Learning, and Teens*, advocating research to help advance future youth services to libraries and academia.

2.1.3 Elderly Services Since 1950, the population aged 65 and over in the United States has been increasing, rising from 8.1% of the total population in 1950 to 12.8% in 2009, and may further increase to 20.2% by 2050. This will not only result in Americans aged 65 and over reaching one-fifth of the total population, but also make the oldest elderly, those aged 80 and over, the largest age group—32.5 million people, accounting for 7.4% of the U.S. population [12]. For libraries, the rising number of elderly users directly leads to changes in the types and scale of demand, making it necessary to pay attention to group changes and adjust service directions.

Based on this, American public libraries have launched many special services for the elderly. A ten-year study funded by the National Institute of Health showed that Demco Software’s brain training software specifically provided for libraries reduces the risk of dementia among the elderly. The Demco Software platform can provide users with free BrainHQ service, an online brain training system with many health benefits, such as improving attention, reaction speed, and memory, as well as greatly helping emotional control, confidence enhancement, and work ability improvement. Currently, hundreds of public libraries in the United States can provide the reaction speed online training developed by this institute for elderly users [13]. Additionally, public libraries in Chicago (Illinois), San Francisco (California), and Cornelius (Oregon) have planned service outlets in elderly housing projects to improve the cultural life quality of elderly community residents. For example, Cornelius, an agricultural town west of Portland, Oregon, despite being plagued by poverty, still raised \$18.5 million

to build an elderly community called Cornelius Place thanks to federal and state financial support, private donations, and low-income property tax credits. The project adopted a public-private partnership (PPP) model, with the library and two real estate companies cooperating to build the project. The real estate companies specialized in developing affordable housing, placing senior apartments on the ground floor, while the library planned service outlets in the elderly residential area to make it more convenient for the elderly to access services. Based on age characteristics and group needs, the library provides services such as network security training, estate planning, magnifiers, and computer assistance for the elderly, greatly enriching their lives and building a friendly and harmonious elderly community [14].

2.1.4 Services for People with Disabilities In 1990, the United States passed the Americans with Disabilities Act, stipulating that people with disabilities have equal rights to access public services. The introduction of this act laid the policy foundation for American public library services for people with disabilities. American public libraries are committed to providing services for all groups. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) particularly emphasizes that libraries are key to achieving inclusiveness and sustainable development, and everyone has the right to access information [15], and has extensively carried out a series of services to meet various needs of people with disabilities.

Network research found that public libraries in many parts of the United States can provide specialized services for people with disabilities. For example, Berkeley Public Library extends the loan period for all library materials for people with disabilities to twice the regular period and provides adaptive accessible computers for people with disabilities, as well as facilities and services such as sign language interpretation and audiobooks with embedded subtitles in DVDs [16]. The Monroe County Public Library in Indiana starts from architecture, logistics, and equipment to enable people with disabilities to quickly enjoy library services efficiently and conveniently. The library has wheelchairs for people with disabilities at every entrance of the parking lot, establishes drive-through windows in the parking lot, and also provides book logistics services to deliver library materials to the homes of people with disabilities. Reading glasses and magnifiers visible everywhere in the library also reflect care for vulnerable groups [17].

2.1.5 Services for Diverse Races A recent study by the Pew Research Center shows that as the number of immigrants and ethnic minorities continues to increase, Americans are more racially and ethnically diverse than in the past, and this diversification is expected to strengthen in the coming decades. By 2055, the United States will no longer have a single race or majority ethnicity. American public libraries are striving to create an inclusive public space for different racial communities. In the past decade, more than 50 cities and counties in the United States have cooperated with the Government Alliance

on Race and Equity (GARE) to eliminate racism and promote racial equality. Many public libraries have been at the forefront of regional initiatives, actively changing policies, measures, and systems to provide equal services for people of color. For example, since 2013, Madison Public Library has incorporated racial equity principles into staff training and is committed to establishing an institutional culture that identifies and addresses racial discrimination. Madison Public Library also actively seeks help from community organizations and relevant personnel to ensure that library services can guarantee racial equality [18].

2.2 National Literacy Education

2.2.1 Digital Literacy There are 16,500 communities across the United States, and the digital divide exists due to geographical differences. Public libraries play a pivotal role in eliminating the digital divide. American public libraries are important providers of public networks, computers, and related training, which help improve community members' competitiveness in today's digital world. In February 2017, the Public Library Association (PLA) and Cox Communications announced a new partnership aimed at strengthening and expanding the joint commitment of various organizations to provide digital literacy training at local libraries and online learning on DigitalLearn.org to help low-income families and their members use digital technology.

2.2.2 Health Literacy The Report points out that the low economic efficiency of the American healthcare system is caused by low national health literacy levels, with 90% of American adults finding it difficult to understand and utilize health information they encounter daily. In 2017, PLA and the National Network of Libraries of Medicine (NNLM) launched a national initiative to enhance public librarians' knowledge and skills in user health services. PLA and NNLM assessed public librarians' health information needs and shared relevant free resources and professional development opportunities to help librarians better serve users' health information needs. Additionally, public libraries cooperate closely with communities, supporting community activities in learning organizations to find solutions to the national "opioid crisis" (referring to the opioid drug abuse crisis; opioids are addictive drugs, and thousands of Americans die from opioid overdose every year). In September 2017, PLA and WebJunction (a service organization providing relevant knowledge and skills to American librarians) cooperated to create a virtual "town hall meeting" on the opioid crisis and created a "Libraries and the Opioid Crisis" Facebook page where librarians can discuss and share online.

2.3 Sustainable Service Resources

Sustainability is the prerequisite and foundation for public libraries to provide equalized services to the whole society, specifically manifested in the sustainable use of library energy, equipment, resources, and technology. The International

Federation of Library Associations and Institutions has established a Special Interest Group on Environment, Sustainability and Libraries to address library sustainability issues. The group's main tasks are: to understand the impact of climate change on libraries (transformation of storage environment, building insulation, and impact on library finance and management); to apply library environmentally friendly practices (rainwater recycling, use of renewable energy, control of printing, paper recycling); to propose environmental development suggestions for the library industry (recycling outdated documents, using biodegradable materials); to increase and promote library resources and services related to sustainable development (developing environmental theme activities, exhibitions, promotion series); to raise librarians' awareness of environmental issues.

American public libraries have also responded positively in this regard, issuing multiple library sustainability resource recommendations. The specific content and significance are shown in [19]:

Table 1. Overview of Sustainable Development Resources in American Libraries

Organization/Individual	Resource/Action	Purpose/Significance
Sustainable Libraries Task Force	<i>Sustainable Thinking: Ensuring the Future of Libraries in an Uncertain World</i> by Rebekkah Smith Aldrich	Helps librarians identify library development opportunities, secure operational funds, and make librarians loyal to the communities they serve
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign	Created the library blog <i>Green Libraries: Sustainable Libraries</i>	Increases sustainability practices for associations, industries, libraries, and the communities they serve
ALA Sustainability Round Table	Members can exchange ideas and opportunities on sustainable development	Provides resources for the library community to support sustainable development, including curriculum development, collections, exhibitions, activities, promotion, communication, library buildings, and space design

Organization/Individual	Resource/Action	Purpose/Significance
ALA Executive Committee	Formulates white papers describing priority areas and related concerns	Helps libraries become more environmentally friendly

3. Implications for Equalized Services of Public Libraries in China

The Report and network research show that the equalization of American public library services is reflected in caring for vulnerable groups, promoting universal digital and health literacy education, and focusing on sustainable use of library resources. This has certain enlightenment and reference significance for Chinese public libraries to serve all citizens without discrimination and to grant citizens the basic right to equally enjoy library services.

3.1 Strengthen Services for Vulnerable Groups Based on Demand

Vulnerable groups, also called socially disadvantaged groups, have difficulty obtaining social wealth due to relatively weak group power and are marginalized in social distribution. They include children, the elderly, people with disabilities, and ethnic minorities. Vulnerable groups include not only the traditionally defined old, weak, sick, and disabled, but also those who have become isolated due to increasingly fierce social competition. Each individual within the group is in a constantly changing social state, making it a dynamic, open, and relative concept [20]. Although vulnerable groups are at the bottom of society, they also have their own specific information needs [21]. Against the backdrop of equalization, many Chinese public libraries have begun to strengthen services for vulnerable groups. By the end of 2017, more than 200 public libraries at municipal, district, street, and some community levels in Shenzhen had opened special reading areas for minors, with a total collection of 6.55 million children's books, holding over 6,000 various reading activities for minors annually with more than 3.5 million participants [22]; 24 public libraries in Beijing, including the Capital Library and Dongcheng District Library, opened free access to the elderly; the National Library, relying on the "Spring Rain Project," carried out library lectures, reading promotion, and other cultural activities in border areas, especially for ethnic minorities, achieving good results [23]. Nevertheless, Chinese public library services for vulnerable groups remain at the reading popularization level and have not truly carried out diversified and specialized services oriented toward the needs of vulnerable groups.

As described above, American public libraries provide specialized digital media usage guidance services for children, improve librarians' service capabilities to meet youth needs, and provide brain training services for elderly user groups. Therefore, it is recommended that Chinese public libraries further fully under-

stand the needs of vulnerable groups and carry out specific services in a targeted manner. For example, in response to the reading and dissemination needs of ethnic minority languages and scripts, they should increase the organization and protection of ethnic minority books and hold promotional activities to publicize ethnic minority scripts.

Furthermore, the Report predicts future trends in American public library services, highlighting the significant trend of increasing aging user groups. In fact, China's population aging is also very serious. By the end of 2017, China's elderly population aged 60 and over reached 241 million, accounting for 17.3% of the total population, meaning that about 2 out of every 10 people are elderly, and this number will continue to grow [24]. The surge in the elderly population will affect all aspects of social life. For public libraries, it may cause changes in collection orientation (leisure reading, large-print books), related programs (medical information support, library technical guidance), and services (book lending, deposit savings). Facing the growing elderly population, Chinese public libraries should learn from advanced experiences, actively adjust service content and direction, take building libraries in the community as their mission, and promote the equalization process of public libraries by establishing reading areas for elderly users, printing books with enlarged fonts, adding popular collections, and providing training on using library digital resources.

3.2 Emphasize National Literacy Education

P. Gilster defined digital literacy in his book *Digital Literacy* as the ability to understand and use various digital resources and information displayed through computers and to comprehend the true meaning of this information [25]. Digital literacy has gradually evolved from a cutting-edge capability to a basic one. In September 2016, the G20 Hangzhou Summit released the *G20 Digital Economy Development and Cooperation Initiative*, emphasizing that improving the public's digital technology and digital literacy is very important [26]. Digital literacy has become a new requirement for workers and consumers.

In recent years, under policy guidance, the focus of digital literacy education in China has always been on children and youth, with schools and other educational institutions taking the lead, without truly achieving universal coverage of digital literacy or recognizing the key role of public libraries in popularizing digital literacy education. The United States has launched multiple programs for digital literacy and training and created digital technology websites for online learning. The development of digital literacy education inevitably involves online learning, in which schools, families, and libraries all play important roles. China should regard public libraries as one of the important positions for digital literacy education, utilize the characteristics of public libraries serving the general public, carry out digital literacy activities, enable everyone to have learning opportunities for network technology, improve public digital literacy, add and improve digital equipment in public libraries to meet the needs of all age groups, and open online platforms to strengthen network skills training and

improve national literacy.

Additionally, public librarians should have professional capabilities that are not static but dynamically developing. C. Desforges expressed the competency development formula as: $\text{Competency} = \text{Expertise} \times \text{Motivation} \times \text{Opportunity}$ [30]. This shows that public librarians should assess the situation and adapt to changes in developing professional service capabilities, possessing dynamic thinking. Public libraries and librarians themselves should constantly perceive social development, understand the changing trends of user needs, and verify and deepen this understanding in specific practice to form dynamic service capabilities that continuously adapt to environmental and user changes.

3.3 Follow Sustainable Development Principles

The sustainable use of resources is the guarantee for the survival of public libraries and the provision of equalized services. As an important public cultural infrastructure, public libraries should achieve low-carbon and green emissions. Regarding the sustainable development of public libraries, domestic focus is mainly on the renovation of library buildings, without realizing that the organic integration of all elements (resources, systems, education, policies, etc.), including buildings, is the way to achieve both internal and external sustainable development of public libraries [28]. Although public libraries are committed to serving the public, it does not mean they should abandon their fundamentals, as this would inevitably damage future generations' opportunities to use libraries and their resources [29], making so-called equalized services unsustainable. The author believes that Chinese public libraries could learn from the "3E" (Economy, Ecology, Equity) concept proposed by the ALA Environmental Task Force, and follow the example of establishing a development group focusing on the interests of environment, sustainability, and libraries to specifically responsible for the sustainable construction of public libraries. This group would guide and supervise Chinese public libraries in architectural design, resource usage behavior, low-carbon equipment emissions, sustainable development projects, and staff training on library environmental issues, supplemented by certification standards and policy guarantees related to public library sustainable development actions, which could greatly accelerate the construction process of green public libraries in China and provide a power source for equalized public library services.

3.4 Improve Librarians' Equalization Service Capabilities

The foundation of public libraries' equalization services is librarians, whose understanding and practice of the equalization concept determine the ultimate performance of equalization services. Most Chinese public libraries focus on comprehensive but not targeted librarian capacity development. However, in an equalization environment, public librarians must uphold the concept of fair service, deeply understand the needs of the broad user base, and previous professional and technical knowledge may be insufficient to meet the needs of serving

various user layers. Therefore, the cultivation of targeted service capabilities is indispensable. The staffing of American public libraries is often divided by user groups; for example, most community libraries are equipped with specialized children's service librarians mainly responsible for children's services and related activities. To better provide equalization services, Chinese public libraries could learn from this approach by cultivating professional librarians and creating various targeted capacity-building training opportunities for them.

Meanwhile, combined with the aforementioned population aging issue, the public's health information needs are increasing. The 19th National Congress report clearly proposed the "Healthy China Strategy" to meet the public's personalized and diversified health needs. According to surveys by the National Health and Family Planning Commission, Chinese residents' health literacy levels are also improving year by year, but overall health literacy remains at a relatively low level with unbalanced development among different groups [27]. Therefore, in the process of popularizing digital literacy, Chinese public libraries could learn from practices in developed countries like the United States by enhancing cooperation with hospitals and other health institutions and social platforms to publish non-discriminatory health information in real time, thereby 致力于 improving national health literacy.

Conclusion

This study interprets the current situation of American public library services from an equalization perspective, examining its consideration of service audiences at all levels, emphasis on universal digital and health literacy education, and commitment to sustainable library resource utilization. This has certain enlightenment significance for the equalization service development of public libraries in China. Chinese public libraries must adopt foreign advanced experiences while being rooted in China's own development status, enabling public libraries to move toward the goal of providing public services that everyone can enjoy.

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Received Date: 2018-06-04**Revised Date:** 2018-08-14**Page Range:** 124-130**Responsible Editor:** Wang Chuanqing

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

Source: ChinaXiv — Machine translation. Verify with original.