Research on the Construction of a Data Public Service Platform for the Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract

Abstract: Purpose/Significance: This study systematically reviews the current state of research on Belt and Road data/information services, analyzes existing problems, and clarifies the crucial bridging and supporting role of such services in achieving “policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds.” Method/Process: Based on the identified objectives and strategies for Belt and Road data/information services, this study constructs a strategic planning framework and conducts systematic analysis and research on its positioning, principles, institutional mechanisms, approaches, and safeguard measures to explore more effective service models. Results/Conclusion: Given the numerous countries along the Belt and Road, establishing a public service platform for Belt and Road data/information can address issues including unbalanced and insufficient access to data/information support for users along the route, shortages of professional talent and backward infrastructure for information services in developing countries along the route. It can also resolve historical challenges such as information barriers arising from information security concerns, difficulties in collecting minority language data, challenges in minority language data communication, and data fragmentation, thereby fostering sound cooperation and development while promoting the deepening of China’ s reform and opening-up.

Full Text

Abstract

[**Purpose/Significance**] This study systematically reviews the current state of data/information services research for the Belt and Road Initiative, analyzing existing problems and clarifying the critical role of such services as a vital link and supporting mechanism for achieving the “Five Connectivities” of policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and

people-to-people bonds. [**Methodology/Process**] Based on clearly defined objectives and strategies for Belt and Road data/information services, this paper constructs a strategic plan for these services, systematically analyzing and examining their positioning, principles, institutional frameworks, implementation approaches, and safeguard measures to identify more effective service models. [**Results/Conclusion**] The Belt and Road development strategy involves numerous countries along its routes. Establishing a Belt and Road data public service platform can address imbalances and inadequacies in data/information access for users along the routes, tackle shortages of professional talent and backward information service infrastructure in developing countries, overcome information barriers arising from national security concerns, resolve the historical challenge of collecting data in less commonly spoken languages, and solve problems related to communication difficulties and data fragmentation. Such a platform would thereby facilitate sound cooperation and development while promoting the deepening of China' s reform and opening-up.

Keywords: Belt and Road, data, public service platform, initiative, information
Classification Number: G647

0. Introduction

As China' s reform and opening-up continues to deepen, the scope of dialogue and cooperation between China and the world has become increasingly extensive. The Belt and Road Initiative (hereinafter referred to as "the Initiative") represents a crucial national strategy for China' s reform and opening-up, requiring "policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds" (hereinafter referred to as the "Five Connectivities"). The optimal allocation of resources and joint development among participating countries depends heavily on information services, which serve as an essential link and support system for the Five Connectivities, as intellectual nourishment sustaining the Initiative' s vitality, and as continuous momentum helping people across participating countries realize their vision for a better life. The extent to which data/information services can fulfill these functions and requirements hinges fundamentally on the collection, storage, transmission, and processing of relevant Belt and Road data. In response, academia has conducted theoretical research from the perspective of literature resource development, while government agencies, universities, research institutes, and enterprises have developed various Belt and Road-related databases.

1. Research Status of Belt and Road Data/Information Services

Current literature on Belt and Road data/information services remains relatively limited. Key contributions include: Guan Zhiying (2017), who addressed the overall scarcity of literature resources on China' s neighboring countries in Chinese universities, explored innovative mechanisms for cooperative collection

development, and proposed a top-level design framework for systematic, large-scale collection of such resources [1]. Yan Dan (2018) analyzed information resource requirements for Belt and Road research and recommended that university libraries collect and organize resource types from participating countries [2]. Ding Botao (2017) identified problems such as obstructed data sources in China' s current Belt and Road database construction, examined experiences from international organizations and multinational corporations in promoting cross-border information sharing and integration, and proposed strategies including improving international big data cooperation mechanisms externally and enhancing international big data development capabilities internally [3]. Ding Botao (2018) subsequently proposed a data bank model for Belt and Road information resource integration, suggesting that this approach could enable large-scale integration at relatively low cost [4].

These studies primarily address two aspects: first, issues in literature resource construction in Chinese universities, as represented by Guan Zhiying (2017) [1] and Yan Dan (2018) [2]; and second, challenges in China' s Belt and Road database construction, as represented by Ding Botao (2017, 2018) [3,4]. The service targets of these studies are primarily domestic Chinese users, aiming to meet Chinese demand for Belt and Road information resources.

2. Belt and Road Database Construction: Current Status and Problem Analysis

2.1.1 Overview of Belt and Road Databases Developed Domestically and Abroad Since the Initiative' s proposal, numerous Chinese institutions have developed Belt and Road databases, including: the Countries of the World Database [5], Belt and Road Database–National Frontier Strategy Support Platform [6], Belt and Road Research and Decision-Making Strategic Support Platform [7], China Belt and Road Portal [8], China Economic Information Network Belt and Road Statistical Database [9], Xinhua Silk Road [10], Belt and Road Mining Industry Database [11], Regional Studies Database– "Belt and Road" [12], Belt and Road Industrial and Information Database [13], Belt and Road Thematic Database (OBOR Collection) [14], Peking University Belt and Road Data Analysis Platform [15], Belt and Road Database Series [16], and others.

Abroad, the private enterprise EBSCO has developed the "Belt and Road Resources Center" database, which includes publications from 65 countries along the routes, covering over 70 disciplinary themes such as politics, engineering construction, and architecture. In terms of data content, it has collected more than 5,300 unique full-text journals since 1975, over 120 full-text newspapers and wire services, and more than 500 reports and conference proceedings [17]. Additionally, Factiva, an online business information system jointly established by Dow Jones and Reuters in 1999, covers some Belt and Road countries and regions, collecting content from newspapers, journals, magazines, and news agencies [18].

2.1.2 Characteristics of Current Database Development From a data classification perspective, databases can be categorized as: macro-level databases, theoretical/academic databases, promotional databases, knowledge popularization databases, and statistical databases. From the perspective of construction entities, China has developed numerous databases, predominantly driven or led by government or official agencies , with most constructed by government bodies, universities, research institutes, and state-owned enterprises, giving them a strong official character and advantages in funding and collecting domestic/industry-specific data. Abroad, private enterprises such as EBSCO, Dow Jones, and Reuters have achieved better results in Belt and Road database development. Regarding service targets and needs satisfaction, databases primarily serve teaching and research, focusing on research-oriented information needs and encompassing "diversified information including news, academic developments, academic journals, conferences, and patents" [19]. In terms of languages, domestic databases (except for a few like Peking University' s OBOR Collection) primarily contain Chinese-language resources, while foreign databases cover multiple languages.

2.2 Existing Problems Overall, current Belt and Road data research and practice face several issues in data collection, needs satisfaction, information integration, and database construction across countries.

2.2.1 Partial Data Collection In terms of geographical coverage of Belt and Road countries and regions, the structural completeness, content comprehensiveness, and systematic knowledge organization remain far from adequate. Much foreign data and information collection remains in a blank or initial stage. Even comprehensive databases like EBSCO focus primarily on academic resources such as journals, newspapers, wire news reports, and conference proceedings, excluding other data types.

2.2.2 Insufficient and Inadequate User Needs Satisfaction Regarding the application needs of Belt and Road countries and regions, data relevance, accuracy, and timeliness fall far short of requirements, particularly for industrial applications and solving specific practical problems. Chinese databases exhibit localized service characteristics, primarily serving domestic users while providing seriously inadequate or even missing data services for users in other Belt and Road countries. Consequently, current Belt and Road databases cannot satisfy demands in terms of breadth, depth, or professional relevance for either Chinese or other participating countries' users.

2.2.3 Low Degree of Information Integration From an information integration perspective, fragmented, isolated, and low-density information remains dominant. China' s numerous databases are still at the stage of simple data collection, lacking deep mining to enhance data value.

2.2.4 Limited Database Construction in Participating Countries Regarding database construction in other Belt and Road countries, few have established dedicated Belt and Road databases like China. The emphasis on, participation in, and investment in Belt and Road data development among participating countries requires significant improvement.

2.3 Cause Analysis Objectively, factors include information security barriers between nations, numerous less commonly spoken languages, divergent data standards, backward information infrastructure, low data/information processing capabilities, shortage of professional talent, and insufficient R&D investment. Subjectively, factors include development objectives, positioning, and management mechanisms.

Information security barriers involve highly sensitive data and information issues. Countries are extremely sensitive about information security, readily adopting various precautionary measures such as national data security standards and related systems that create barriers, severely hindering foreign data collection, transfer, exchange, and use. Belt and Road routes involve many less commonly spoken languages and regions with numerous language groups and small user populations, making it difficult to achieve economies of scale or economic profitability. This creates problems of insufficient investment and talent shortages in translation to English or other languages.

Regarding data standards, each country has its own data standard system, and some countries or regions with lower development levels have not yet established complete data standard systems, causing incompatibility and integration problems during data collection. Belt and Road routes primarily involve developing countries and regions where, constrained by economic development levels, information infrastructure is seriously inadequate in many countries and regions. The lack of high-speed communication networks, service base stations, and data processing equipment severely impacts information service quality. For instance, outdated facilities and equipment cause excessive noise interference, resulting in information transmission delays, loss, distortion, and devaluation, with loss and distortion rendering data worthless.

Low data/information processing capabilities mean many countries and regions remain at primary or primitive stages of data/information processing, with traditional paper-based information collection, storage, and transmission still accounting for a considerable proportion and electronic data representing a low percentage, resulting in low processing efficiency and slow speed. Professional talent is scarce; compared to developed countries and regions, Belt and Road countries and regions lack talent in data management and information processing, let alone high-quality professional management personnel and teams.

Insufficient R&D investment means that, due to economic backwardness and inadequate attention, some countries and regions along the routes have seriously insufficient investment in data research and development, resulting in low-level

data development and application. Different objectives and positioning mean that most Chinese databases were originally developed for specific domestic user groups—for example, university databases primarily serve faculty and student research, while some institutions developed databases simply to respond to the Initiative without clear target users. These databases are mostly non-profit. In contrast, foreign private enterprises like EBSCO and Factiva have clear user targets and operate for profit.

Different management mechanisms mean that Chinese databases often have official backgrounds (government or state-owned enterprise) or are public institutions, making it difficult to avoid common administrative problems such as rigid management and low efficiency. EBSCO and Factiva, however, adopt market mechanisms with global operations, possessing strong adaptability and competitiveness.

In summary, current Belt and Road data/information services cannot fully play their role as a link and support system for the Five Connectivities. Addressing theoretical and practical problems in Belt and Road literature resource construction, this paper proposes constructing a Belt and Road Data Public Service Platform (hereinafter referred to as "the Platform") to serve the Five Connectivities. The study examines the Platform' s construction philosophy, basic positioning, fundamental principles, institutional framework, implementation approach, main structure, safeguard measures, and operational management, aiming to provide Belt and Road countries and regions with structurally complete, comprehensive, accurate, and professionally relevant real-time data/information services.

3. Strategic Planning for Platform Construction

3.1.1 Sustainable Development Concept This concept contains two dimensions. First, the content provided by the Platform must be sustainable. The Five Connectivities represent a long-term construction process requiring continuous injection of new content and constant upgrades, necessitating corresponding data and information support. Therefore, the Platform's content must be sustainable, consistent with, matched to, and coordinated with the development of the Five Connectivities. Second, sustainability requires both external support and internal capacity building. On one hand, due to the Platform' s special mission to serve the Five Connectivities, public service constitutes a crucial task, and its international social benefits far exceed its economic benefits. On the other hand, because many less commonly spoken languages exist along the routes, data services struggle to achieve economies of scale and economic profitability. Consequently, the Platform requires coordination among participating countries and continuous external support in terms of policy and funding, while also constantly building its own capacity to generate revenue by providing high-quality services to countries and users along the routes, thereby enhancing its value and achieving some degree of self-sustainability.

3.1.2 Basic Positioning The Platform should be positioned as a "public" international cooperative organization, with "public"encompassing three meanings. First, the Platform should be open to all countries and regions along the routes, with each country serving simultaneously as a builder, data provider, user, and beneficiary. Moreover, the Platform should not exclude non-participating countries when conditions permit. Second, service targets should not be limited to specific users in a particular country but should include all users along the routes. Third, serving the Five Connectivities constitutes the Platform' s fundamental purpose, determining that it should be a non-profit or minimally profitable "public" institution providing comprehensive data and information public services for the Five Connectivities. However, this does not preclude profitability in some sections, which can not only maintain competitive vitality but also provide continuous economic support for the Platform.

3.2.1 Basic Principles The Belt and Road Data/Information Service Platform should adhere to principles of independent operation, consultation, joint construction, and shared benefits. The principle of independent operation means the Platform should be an independent international cooperative organization in terms of overall operational management and economic accounting, serving Belt and Road construction. It should not be subordinate to any single country or region, nor should it represent the actions of any particular nation, thus possessing relative independence. This emphasis on independent operation is essential because data/information services are highly sensitive issues for all countries. If dominated by a single nation, it would naturally trigger information security concerns among other countries [3] and even create information barriers, causing enormous obstacles to data collection and preventing the establishment of a robust data/information service system supporting the Five Connectivities.

The principles of consultation, joint construction, and shared benefits have been well articulated by Chinese Ambassador to the UK Liu Xiaoming regarding the Initiative [21]. Here, the Platform not only follows these principles but also enriches them beyond their original meaning. "Consultation"means the Platform's basic framework and rules should be jointly formulated and observed by all participating parties, ensuring "soft connectivity"in rules and standards [21]. "Joint construction" means that while the Platform operates independently, it does not exclude autonomous management of certain sections by individual countries or regions. For instance, in country-specific sections, data management concerning a particular country should be entirely managed by an institution entrusted by that country (such as China' s Development Research Center entrusting Beijing DRCNET Information Co., Ltd. to operate the DRCNET platform), including decision-making authority over data collection, storage, transmission, exchange, and processing, as well as external access permissions (including content, scope, and degree of openness).

As the largest producer, provider, consumer, and beneficiary of its own data resources, a country can ensure the quality and efficiency of data collection by

taking the lead in gathering and organizing its own data. This approach also provides an effective solution to the difficulties of data collection on transnational platforms. The management team of HBIS Serbia' s steel plant achieved tremendous success by adhering to the "three localizations" principle of localization in employment, benefits, and culture—a successful experience that the Platform can learn from [22]. Only when the Platform' s data reaches a certain scale, achieves unparalleled quality, and offers unique content can it provide high-quality data resource services to participating countries and gain their strong support, creating a virtuous cycle. This can only be achieved through the principle of "joint construction." "Shared benefits" means that countries along the routes can access data from other countries that is open to them through the Platform and can also determine access permissions for such data to their own users. It also includes obtaining assistance and support from the international community in hardware infrastructure, talent, technology, and funding through the Platform, thereby sharing the dividends of human progress.

3.2.2 Basic System The Platform should adopt a system of "one platform, multiple management systems." Sub-platforms on the Platform should be divided into public sub-platforms and country-specific sub-platforms according to their management entities. The former should be uniformly managed by the Platform' s administrators, while the latter should be managed by institutions entrusted by individual countries. For a country' s sub-platform, the entrusting institution should have authority over data collection, access permissions (both for sub-platform data externally and public platform data internally), pricing (for sub-platform data externally and internally, and for public platform data internally), sub-platform personnel management, management of domestic servers, and infrastructure management.

This "one platform, multiple systems" approach delegates all authority for data collection and access for domestic users to individual countries, ensuring participating countries' information security, minimizing resistance encountered during data collection, and fundamentally solving the historical difficulty of collecting data in less commonly spoken languages.

3.2.3 Basic Approach Given the Platform' s extensive data sources, rich content, and diverse languages, enabling rapid search, transmission, and integration of such vast and complex data requires adherence to uniform rules during data collection and input, including unified structure, unified standards, and unified language.

The Platform' s structure must be scientific, standardized, and unified. "Scientific" refers to the degree to which the structure ensures data collection completeness, redundancy, and executability. "Standardized" requires that the structural design be oriented toward the needs of users for Belt and Road data while following internationally accepted rules or successful paradigms. "Unified" demands that all participating parties input data according to the Platform' s designed

structure.

In addition to using domestic or regional standards, data representation should also include internationally accepted standards or Platform-agreed standards to minimize user learning costs, information conversion and search costs, and prevent erroneous information transmission. For example, measurement systems vary considerably among countries. By including conversion relationships to internationally accepted or Platform-agreed standards alongside domestic units in documents or statistics, users can correctly and conveniently understand the information, ensuring efficient and effective information transmission.

The Platform should adopt a "local language + common language + other languages" model to eliminate language barriers. Since using local languages for data collection offers low cost, high efficiency, and high accuracy, it can rapidly accumulate data quantities in the short term. Therefore, data from participating countries will primarily be described in their native languages. To make this data accessible and convenient for users from all countries, expand user groups, and unlock data value, it must be translated into internationally common languages (English). Given the enormous translation workload, this process can proceed gradually. In the initial stage, only abstracts may be translated, with full-text translation following when users require it, when there is strong demand for full-text documents, or when the Platform has more adequate translation resources. Additionally, participants should be encouraged and supported to translate documents into other languages, particularly those of countries with frequent investment, trade, and cultural exchanges that create more employment opportunities for the translating country.

4. Platform Architecture

Considering the Platform' s service mission toward the Five Connectivities and the needs of its service targets, the Platform proposes to build modules including a news database, policy document database, standards database, business information database, and country-specific database (see [Figure 1: see original paper]). The country-specific database should be primarily constructed by participating Belt and Road countries themselves, with guidance and support from the Platform' s leadership and implementation group, while other modules should be mainly constructed by the leadership and implementation group composed of participating countries, with assistance and support from participants. The main contents of each module are as follows:

4.1 News Database This includes activity reports on Belt and Road-related organizations such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank; progress reports on major Belt and Road activities such as China-Europe Railway Express and major infrastructure projects; coverage of Belt and Road conferences and forums such as the Boao Forum for Asia; reports on crises, epidemics, disasters, and emergencies related to the Belt and Road and their collaborative management; and news selected by participating countries from their domestic news

databases for external openness.

4.2 Policy Document Database This includes agreements, policies, and initiatives related to the Belt and Road formulated by relevant organizations or participating parties.

4.3 Standards Database This comprises standards and related documents jointly followed and used by Belt and Road participants.

4.4 Business Information Database This includes Belt and Road-related business information such as project bidding information, investment and financing information, commercial exhibition updates, and tourism.

4.5 Country-Specific Database This primarily contains domestic information from Belt and Road participating countries, with recommended modules including a news database, basic information database, policy document database, business information database, and academic resources database. The news database provides news and information from participating countries, mainly focusing on news serving or related to the Belt and Road. The basic information database follows the structure and content of the Countries of the World Database, including overviews (covering capital, national characteristics, geographical location, administrative divisions, natural environment, population and languages, ethnic groups and religions, folk customs and festivals, etc.), politics, economy, military, culture, diplomacy, and society. The policy document database includes publicly accessible domestic policies and regulations, particularly those related to foreign investment, financing, trade, commerce, and travel services. The business information database mainly provides business information for Belt and Road participants, merchants, and consumers, such as foreign investment and financing information, bidding information, and foreign e-commerce information. The academic resources database primarily includes various open-access publications such as journals, dissertations, conference reports and papers, domestic reports, and statistical data.

5. Platform Safeguard Measures

To enable data/information services to effectively support the Five Connectivities, concerted efforts must focus on technological breakthroughs while ensuring adequate safeguards in terms of institutions, funding, personnel, hardware, equipment, and security to guarantee the Platform' s directionality, robustness, scientific rigor, and applicability.

5.1 Institutional Safeguards

The Belt and Road involves numerous countries and regions with extensive cooperation and diverse coordination matters. Therefore, participating parties

must formulate practical and feasible systems through high-level dialogues and consultations at various levels, clarifying consultation procedures for Platform planning, construction, and management, as well as the rights and obligations of participating parties and various management systems for Platform operations.

5.2 Funding and Personnel Safeguards

Given the Platform' s enormous construction scale and its inclusive, mutually beneficial characteristics, profit margins are very limited, and profitability is fundamentally impossible in the short term, especially considering the high cost of collecting data in less commonly spoken languages and small user groups [23]. Consequently, strong funding guarantees are essential. Potential funding sources include: first, seeking interest-free or low-interest loans from financial institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank; second, collecting membership fees from participating parties; third, seeking social sponsorship, particularly from large enterprises participating in Belt and Road construction; and fourth, pre-selling Platform resources such as advertising space.

Since the Platform encompasses information from all participating parties with extensive sources and multiple languages, it demands higher qualifications from management and staff. In addition to solid professional knowledge required by ordinary information service platforms, personnel must also master multiple languages, possess cross-cultural communication skills, and have certain diplomatic knowledge and skills. In terms of Platform management, there should be personnel for the overall Platform and public sub-platforms, as well as personnel for individual country sub-platforms, with higher requirements for the former. By function, there should be leadership group members, administrative personnel, hardware and software design and maintenance technicians, and information management personnel.

Moreover, as most countries along the routes are developing countries with scarce professional technical management personnel, the Platform must take a comprehensive perspective and provide corresponding talent training and development support to ensure balanced and adequate human resources for country-specific sub-platforms.

5.3 Hardware and Security Safeguards

The large number of Belt and Road participating countries and regions determines that data volume will be enormous, imposing high hardware requirements: first, powerful data storage and processing capabilities; second, strong data transmission and communication capabilities to ensure that information needs from participating parties can be fully satisfied in real time.

Faced with the backward information infrastructure in most countries along the routes, three measures are proposed: first, advocating that countries attach importance to this issue, increase investment and policy support, and attract foreign capital and technology; second, seeking support from various Belt and

Road special funds; and third, advocating mutual assistance among participating countries to help less developed countries complete upgrades and transformations.

Since vast amounts of data come from participating parties and Platform servers are distributed across Belt and Road countries with huge disparities in communication infrastructure, significant security challenges exist in data collection, storage, and transmission. Security safeguards should encompass three aspects: first, ensuring data authenticity and reliability, meaning data must be accurate, objective, and authentic during collection and must be preserved without loss, leakage, tampering, or contamination during storage and transmission. Second, safeguarding the legitimate rights and interests of data owners, including copyright-related rights such as publication rights, authorship, modification rights, integrity protection rights, reproduction rights, distribution rights, rental rights, exhibition rights, performance rights, screening rights, broadcasting rights, information network transmission rights, filming rights, adaptation rights, translation rights, and compilation rights. Third, ensuring reasonable and lawful data use [4].

6. Conclusion

Belt and Road data/information services constitute an important link and support for achieving the Five Connectivities. Current research primarily focuses on China' s Belt and Road data service issues, mainly serving domestic users. In practice, Belt and Road database construction still suffers from problems including partial data collection, insufficient and inadequate user needs satisfaction, low information integration, limited database construction in participating countries, and low participation. This paper proposes constructing a Belt and Road Data Public Service Platform as a solution, systematically studying and elaborating on the Platform' s basic positioning, fundamental principles, institutional framework, implementation approach, architecture, and safeguard measures. The proposal incorporates systematic thinking and draws on domestic and international experience, expanding service targets to all countries and users along the routes, effectively addressing imbalances and inadequacies in data/information access and tackling shortages of professional talent and backward information service infrastructure in developing countries. Independent operation and the "one platform, multiple systems" approach can effectively resolve information barriers arising from security concerns and the historical challenge of collecting data in less commonly spoken languages. Unified structure, standards, and language can solve communication difficulties and data fragmentation problems. Therefore, effective implementation of this proposal will comprehensively address various problems in Belt and Road data construction and services, maximizing satisfaction of the needs of participating countries and users.

Potential practical challenges include: first, the impact of international political fluctuations, especially as some countries habitually apply double standards

and biased perspectives to interfere in other countries' internal affairs, creating obstacles to the Platform' s healthy development. Second, achieving consensus among participating countries on constructing the Belt and Road Data Public Service Platform and securing their policy support. Third, significant financing pressure during the initial phase due to the project' s public and non-profit characteristics. Fourth, the sustainable operational management of the Platform project, which requires further research.

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