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# The sole function of university libraries is service innovation.

**Authors:** Zhang Yongcheng, Hao Dongdong, Song Yipin, Wang Jiamu, Hao Dongdong

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## Abstract

A university library is a service production function composed of elements such as management, resources, functions, and innovative spirit, whose sole function of existence is service innovation. Service innovation is a process of organic coupling between librarians' creativity and readers' demand characteristics, representing a unity of dual natures. The clearer the mastery of the first principles and underlying logic of service innovation, the better the coupling of these dual natures, and the more concise and effective the service innovation becomes. The organizational forms of university library service innovation include library organization, service innovation alliance, reader toolbox, service innovation network, and service innovation ecosystem. Through service innovation, the service cost curve is altered, dynamic efficiency is pursued, reader demands are effectively satisfied, and the market legitimacy of university libraries' existence is demonstrated.

## Full Text

### The Sole Function of University Libraries is Service Innovation

**Zhang Yongcheng[1], Hao Dongdong[2], Song Yipin[1], Wang Jiamu[1]**
(1. School of Business, Shandong University, Weihai, Shandong 264209;
2. Library, Harbin Institute of Technology (Weihai), Weihai, Shandong 264209)

**Abstract:** A university library constitutes a service production function comprising elements such as management, resources, functions, and an innovative spirit. Its sole function is service innovation. Service innovation represents an organic coupling process between the creativity of librarians and the characteristics of reader demands—a union of two essential qualities. The clearer one's understanding of the first principles and underlying logic of service innovation,

the better this coupling becomes, and the more concise and effective the service innovation. The organizational forms of university library service innovation include the library organization, service innovation alliance, reader toolbox, service innovation network, and service innovation ecosystem. Through service innovation, libraries alter their service cost curves, seek dynamic efficiency, effectively meet reader needs, and thereby demonstrate the market legitimacy of their existence.

**Keywords:** university library; function; service innovation

## 1 Introduction

Martin Schrettinger (1834), a pioneer of library science, first defined the library as "a vast collection of books designed to rapidly satisfy all literature needs" [1]. S.R. Ranganathan (1931) argued that readers are the service objects of libraries, and that all library work must revolve around reader demands. The principle of "readers first" cannot remain merely rhetorical but must permeate every aspect of library operations, saving readers' time and enhancing service efficiency [2]. Pierce Butler (1933) viewed books as a social mechanism for preserving human memory and libraries as a social device for transplanting this memory into the consciousness of living individuals [3]. Scholars have consistently emphasized reader sovereignty or choice, maintaining that libraries exist to serve readers, and that the "service" or "transplantation" process must be "rapid," "time-saving," and "efficient" in order to "satisfy all literature needs." Readers evaluate all front-end library work through the final service delivered, "voting with their hands or feet," which in turn drives the reallocation of service resources and optimization of service activities. How, then, can libraries meet readers' constantly changing needs at low cost, high efficiency, and high quality? Ranganathan provided only an abstract answer: a library is a growing organism possessing all attributes of living, growing entities; an organism that ceases to grow becomes rigid and eventually dies [4].

## 2 The Value of Service Innovation

A snake that does not shed its skin faces certain death. As part of the university innovation system, university libraries are no different. To transform and renew themselves, they must continuously metabolize their mindsets, concepts, and thinking, regularly "stepping out of the room" and "imagining what lies beyond the mountains." Through openness, inclusiveness, and collaborative innovation, libraries can reduce internally generated entropy, iterate upon past traditions, successes, and experiences, and promote "structural changes" in library services or operations [5].

### 2.1 Offline Service Cost Curves

From an economic perspective, the short-run average service cost curve for traditional offline library operations follows a U-shape, as shown in Figure 1 [Figure

1: see original paper]. This occurs because marginal returns initially increase with service scale, but after reaching optimal scale, marginal returns diminish. Specifically, as service scale expands, the fixed costs of technology, space, and equipment are spread over more service units, reducing average fixed costs; bulk purchasing of books and materials yields greater discounts, lowering average variable costs; and division of labor, collaboration, and learning effects improve service efficiency and reduce unit costs. Consequently, total unit service costs gradually decline, demonstrating economies of scale. At the optimal service scale, total unit service costs are minimized, representing the best possible solution given existing service technology and management capabilities. Beyond this point, further expansion disrupts internal division of labor, encounters technological bottlenecks, and exceeds management resources and capabilities (the Penrose management constraint), leading to service process disorder, reduced efficiency, and rising unit costs—manifesting as diseconomies of scale.

By cultivating craftsmanship spirit and achieving transformation and refinement in service technology and management methods, libraries can continuously shift the short-run average service cost curve downward and to the right, gradually forming a long-run average service cost curve (envelope curve). When long-run optimal service scale is reached, both service technology and management levels have hit their "ceiling"—the maximum possible for the library. No further downward-rightward shifts in the short-run curve are possible. At this juncture, libraries must embrace an innovative spirit, break existing constraints, leave the "track" for the "wilderness," change the "racecourse" rather than merely optimizing the "road conditions," and strive to enter entirely new service domains through service innovation, creating a new service cost curve to achieve "what others don't have." As other libraries follow suit, the pioneering library can employ incremental service innovation to refine the "racecourse," optimize the new service cost curve, achieve "what others have, we do better," and gradually establish new constraints.

### 2.2 Online Service Cost Curves

Through online service innovation, university libraries can fundamentally rewrite their service cost curves. Due to widespread application of internet and digital intelligence technologies, online services partially replace offline services. Although initial development or procurement of online service platforms may involve substantial costs, subsequent annual operation and maintenance costs remain relatively stable. With massive reader participation and cost-sharing, the marginal cost of expanding online service scale gradually approaches zero, and long-run average service costs continue to decline—though at a slower rate than long-run marginal costs—ultimately also approaching zero (but never reaching it). Similarly, the cost curves of NSTL and commercial database companies follow this pattern, representing the fruits of service innovation, as shown in Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper].

University libraries are co-created by internal and external stakeholders includ-

ing universities, librarians, readers, database companies, booksellers, and journal publishers, while simultaneously creating and shaping all these stakeholders. They develop synergistically through mutual creation, benefiting from mutualism and symbiosis. The existence of university libraries requires two forms of legitimacy: first, social legitimacy—establishment and operation in accordance with laws and regulations, without violating social or professional ethics; second, market legitimacy—effective service outcomes that satisfy internal and external stakeholders centered on readers (a necessary condition, altruistic), and efficient service processes that keep service costs below social benefits (a sufficient condition, self-interested). This process essentially reflects Adam Smith's "invisible hand" at work. Social legitimacy poses essentially no problem for university libraries. Under conditions of reader sovereignty, how can they ensure market legitimacy? The only path is continuous service innovation. By fostering an innovative spirit to create and refine new service cost curves, and by cultivating craftsmanship spirit to push short-run service cost curves downward, libraries create value for readers, opportunities for librarians, and fulfill responsibilities for universities. In other words, service innovation constitutes a concrete manifestation of university libraries' social responsibility and their only path forward. University libraries are created by certain stakeholders, and service innovation exists for those very stakeholders.

## 3 The Basic Logic of Service Innovation

Service innovation represents creative destruction that breaks the "circular flow." It is a process of discovery—discovering reader needs, service product genes, and service technology codes; a process of realization—connecting reader needs, service products, and service technologies to create new services in reverse; and a process of creating scarcity—achieving "what others don't have" or "what others have, we do better," providing new services, meeting new needs, and establishing new advantages.

### 3.1 First Principles

The multifaceted complexity exhibited by all things in the world can only be activated by the clearest cognition and freedom through essence. Early philosophers enjoyed digging to the root, hoping to obtain a logical origin or first principle of a thing to explain the objective world—the origin of all things and their basic composition. First principles involve tracing back to the source, 追溯 ing to the very front end of things and the most basic units of causal factors at each stage, exploring the essence or truth of things. The philosophical concept was proposed by Aristotle. "First" or origin has two dimensions of meaning: first, the meta (Meta-) in spatial dimension—the most basic unit constituting things. For example, Thales believed the basic unit of all things was water, Pythagoras held that number was the origin of all things, and Heraclitus proposed the fire-origin theory. Second, the source in temporal dimension—追溯 ing to the source and exploring the most basic premise of a thing's existence. That

is to say, including service innovation, there exists a most basic, self-evident proposition or assumption in every system that cannot be violated, omitted, or deleted, nor derived from any other proposition or assumption. For instance, Laozi believed that Dao is the most primitive and fundamental existence in the universe, the most fundamental driving force of change in things, and the destination of all things. Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi held that Li (principle) is the origin of all things: for every thing, there is a principle; humans cannot add to or subtract from principle [6]. Wang Yangming further argued that the mind is principle. Without mind, there is no principle; the mind legislates for the universe, and principle is established by the mind [7].

### 3.2 Underlying Logic

Underlying logic refers to the objective, intrinsic, essential, and necessary connections between causal things. It is the rules and procedures that logically link the "first principles" of different causal things starting from the essence or "first principle" of a single thing. It represents the most fundamental internal connections between the "first principles" of causal things. For example, when sodium bicarbonate is added to dilute hydrochloric acid, gas is produced; the underlying logic is $H^+ + HCO_3{}^- = CO_2\uparrow + H_2O$.

First principles represent a way of thinking for analyzing problems, while underlying logic represents the rules and procedures for solving them. The more reliable the "first principle," essence, or truth, the more robust the underlying logic tends to be; the more robust the underlying logic and the better it combines with specific contexts, the stronger the problem-solving capability. Service innovation is a continuous process of deconstruction, reduction, and reconstruction. Deconstruction is the premise; construction is the purpose. Deconstruction aims to explore and restore the essence or truth of things, while construction involves understanding the internal connections between causal things from a holistic perspective and creating new services in reverse. During the deconstruction/discovery and construction/implementation processes, it is necessary to avoid both the fallacy of division and the fallacy of composition—preventing both "misdiagnosis" and "prescribing the wrong medicine."

For university library service innovation, first, following first principles involves, on the one hand, reverse 追溯 ing reader needs to trace service demands, technological demands, and even theoretical demands; on the other hand, vertically deconstructing reader needs, service demands, and technological demands to discover their basic structures and specific characteristics. Second, combining the spatial dimension "first principles" of technological, service, and reader demands to identify the rules and procedures of their intrinsic connections—that is, discovering the underlying logic of service innovation. Third, integrating specific service innovation contexts to conduct overall and detailed design of service innovation, and performing service technology integration and service product integration to creatively meet reader needs, as shown in Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper].

Service innovation must accurately understand readers' intentions and precisely respond to their needs, forming a closed-loop service innovation logic that creates shared value through dynamic feedback and iteration. Among these, reader demand is the starting point, endpoint, and "first principle" of service innovation—the mother of service innovation—while librarian creativity is the father. Service innovation is the process of perceiving, responding to, and connecting librarian creativity with reader demand characteristics, a "union of two genders." The more accurate the understanding of first principles and underlying logic, the more concise the design and implementation, the better the coupling between the two genders, and the more effective the service innovation.

## 4 The "Trilogy" of Service Innovation

As shown in Figure 3, a service innovation generally undergoes three stages: breakthrough service innovation, incremental service innovation, and service maintenance. Breakthrough service innovation constructs a complete monopoly advantage of "what others don't have," incremental service innovation constructs a competitive monopoly advantage of "what others have, we do better," and the maintenance stage reduces service costs, improves service efficiency, and enhances service quality through standardization and other means to meet more readers' standardized demands and obtain good social benefits.

### 4.1 Breakthrough Service Innovation

Breakthrough service innovation focuses on the long-term vision, fostering an innovative spirit to break existing constraints and significantly altering existing service theories, technologies, and products. It represents true 0-to-1, from-nothing-to-something, or creation-from-nothing, characterized by long cycles, non-linearity, and discontinuity. Examples include the shift from print to electronic resources, from offline to online consultation services, and from in-house to interlibrary loan services. It represents a transformation in service function (what to do), entering entirely new service domains, opening up "blue oceans" and new "racecourses," and seeking dynamic efficiency [8]. At this stage, service standardization is insufficient, initial readers are often niche, continuous investment in service innovation is required, and social benefits are not yet ideal.

### 4.2 Incremental Service Innovation

Incremental service innovation focuses on the near-term vision, fostering an innovative spirit to refine and improve existing service theories, technologies, and products along the path of breakthrough service innovation. It represents the progression from 1 to N, such as increasing the per-person book borrowing limit from 10 to 20 volumes, characterized by gradualness, continuity, and cumulativeness. It emphasizes performance enhancement (how to do it better), including improvements in reliability, security, immediacy, and other service metrics, gradually optimizing "deep blue" into "light blue," refining the new

"racecourse," and seeking dynamic efficiency. At this stage, services become increasingly standardized, gain recognition from more readers, begin to generate stable social returns, and gradually form new constraints.

### 4.3 Service Maintenance

The service maintenance stage focuses on the present vision, cultivating craftsmanship spirit. Building upon breakthrough and incremental service innovation, and under given service technology and management conditions, it reduces service costs, improves service efficiency, and enhances service quality through internal potential tapping, resource conservation, and intensive cultivation, promoting continuous inward optimization of service work. It represents the progression from 1 to 1'… from N to N', optimizing "road conditions" and seeking static efficiency. At this stage, services are standardized and scaled, gaining broad recognition from more readers and good social benefits, but development trends determine that existing services will eventually degenerate into a "red ocean," making maintenance unsustainable, as shown in Figure 4 [Figure 4: see original paper].

One cannot have one's cake and eat it too. Pursuing service innovation and differentiation sacrifices service quality, efficiency, and cost, resulting in niche readership; pursuing high service quality, efficiency, and low costs to win more readers implies standardization and inability to meet new demands. Without breakthrough service innovation, libraries cannot forge ahead and build true advantages; without incremental service innovation, they cannot solidify those advantages; without service maintenance, they waste enormous innovation costs and fail to achieve service scaling and economy. Overemphasizing breakthrough service innovation leads to high investment and low returns, ultimately resulting in self-destruction; overemphasizing incremental service innovation leads to the "innovator's dilemma" [9]; overemphasizing service maintenance ultimately results in lost advantages. Sociologist Gustave Le Bon argued that two major events occur after human birth: first, constructing traditions for oneself, then destroying them when their benefits are exhausted. Without tradition there is no civilization; without eliminating these traditions, society cannot progress. The difficulty lies in finding a good balance between stability and change [10]. Therefore, university libraries must seek dynamic balance between service innovation and maintenance, as well as between breakthrough and incremental service innovation, pursuing both dynamic efficiency to create and consolidate new advantages and static efficiency to exhaust the benefits of service innovation.

## 5 Organizational Forms of Service Innovation

As service demands become more personalized, diversified, and digital-intelligent, the complexity, investment, and risks of service innovation increase. Insufficient internal innovation capabilities and potential, combined with the widespread dispersion and availability of innovation resources, have eroded

traditional models. Consequently, organizational forms of university library service innovation have evolved through library organization, service innovation alliance, reader toolbox, service innovation network, and service innovation ecosystem. A detailed comparison of these types appears in Table 1 .

**Table 1** Comparison of Organizational Forms of University Library Service Innovation

| Organizational Form | Innovation Orientation | Relationship with Stakeholders | Openness | Role of Readers | Effectiveness |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Library Organization | Library sovereignty | Library + Books/Suppliers | Closed | Passive recipients | Low efficiency, high cost, poor quality |
| Service Innovation Alliance | Reader sovereignty | Library + Libraries + Stakeholders | Specific openness | Participants, experiencers, co-creators | Complementary advantages, high effectiveness; high interface friction, high management cost |
| Reader Toolbox | Reader sovereignty | Library provides tools | Selective moderate openness | Developers, testers, experiencers | Innovation demand-supply integration, high effectiveness, sustainable |

| Organizational Form | Innovation Orientation | Relationship with Stakeholders | Openness | Role of Readers | Effectiveness |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Service Innovation Network | Reader sovereignty | Library + Ubiquitous stakeholders | Highly open | Leading users | Collective learning, resource complementarity, risk/cost sharing |
| Service Innovation Ecosystem | Reader sovereignty | Mutual creation, symbiosis | Fully open | Co-creators | High effectiveness, sustainable, systematic |

### 5.1 Library Organization

Initially, service innovation depended entirely on the library organization itself, adopting a closed innovation model where innovation resources and capabilities relied completely on internal assets, activities occurred entirely within the library, and outcomes were applied only internally. This paradigm existed primarily before the third industrial revolution, when university libraries monopolized print resources, innovation proceeded slowly, service technology was relatively backward, and readers had few alternative knowledge access channels, emphasizing library sovereignty.

### 5.2 Service Innovation Alliance

After the third industrial revolution, social division of labor and specialization became increasingly pronounced. No library could monopolize all information, technology, or services. As reader demands grew more diverse and personalized, libraries of comparable strength with close relationships and weak competition, as well as libraries and resource suppliers, began forming various service innovation alliances. These alliances targeted specific service projects, shared resources, and collaborated on innovation to effectively meet reader needs. Service innovation alliances are typically task- or project-oriented, involve relatively few members, and feature strong connections among members. When task or project objectives are achieved, alliances may be renewed or dissolved immediately.

### 5.3 Reader Toolbox

The popularization of network information technology has made reader innovation possible. University libraries no longer need to strive to understand reader needs but can instead provide readers with a technical toolbox, allowing them to repeatedly trial-and-error and develop services they need themselves—from minor modifications to major innovations. Examples include disclosing paper verification processes, search tools, and search techniques, enabling readers to conduct independent verification with libraries confirming results. In this model, readers develop, test, and experience new services themselves, while libraries only provide technical support. Service innovation is "reverse-contracted" to readers, with libraries transforming from traditional service innovation agents to technical supporters. The interface between the two shifts from a service interface to a technical interface, with corresponding changes in responsibilities, blurring the roles of supply and demand in service innovation.

### 5.4 Service Innovation Network

After 2000, the widespread popularization of network information technology provided tremendous convenience for cross-organizational connections and collaborative innovation. University libraries gradually connected with more external stakeholders, forming service innovation networks that provide opportunities for collective learning, complementary innovation resources, optimized innovation resource integration mechanisms, and shared innovation risks/costs, further enhancing the effectiveness of service innovation. In this organizational form, lead users (early adopters or rejecters) typically participate to provide demand information, solutions, and user experiences, reducing service development costs.

### 5.5 Service Innovation Ecosystem

The service innovation ecosystem is an organic unity aimed at sustainable service innovation, featuring ecological member relationships and systematic innovation activities. It represents Service Innovation 3.0 (fusion-oriented ecological systematic service innovation), building upon Service Innovation 1.0 (library-oriented closed innovation) and Service Innovation 2.0 (reader-oriented open innovation). It organically integrates the advantages of service innovation alliances, reader toolboxes, and service innovation networks, effectively overcoming their shortcomings such as lack of innovation resources, various interface frictions among members, and insufficient integration and utilization mechanisms for innovation resources, providing a user-friendly, sustainable, holistic solution for addressing various service innovation challenges.

In summary, university libraries must integratively apply various emerging technologies, open their mindsets, organizational boundaries, and internal innovation processes, establish connections with increasingly more external stakeholders, employ multiple innovation organizational forms simultaneously, and collaborate on innovation to systematically solve service innovation challenges and

effectively meet readers' new demands.

## 6 Internal Drivers of Service Innovation

University libraries are physical transformation institutions and team service production modes that convert inputs into service outputs. Their service production function can be expressed as: Q = f(M, R, F, I), where Q represents service output, and M, R, F, and I refer to management, resources (including books, space, technology, etc.), functions (including strategy, culture, systems, mechanisms, structure), and innovative spirit, respectively [11]. Schumpeter argued that innovation involves introducing new production functions to create new combinations [12]. Consequently, library service innovation involves fostering the innovative spirit of all librarians (especially library directors), introducing new service production functions by transforming or resetting resources, functions, or management. This includes three forms: introducing new elements (e.g., AI technology, immersive technology), creating new combinations (e.g., space reconfiguration), or both introducing new elements and creating new combinations (e.g., implementing library strategic planning), to seek dynamic efficiency or innovation efficiency that breaks the "circular flow" and effectively meet the needs of internal and external stakeholders centered on readers [12].

Without innovation, libraries cannot establish new advantages or meet new demands, and thus cannot demonstrate their market legitimacy. Maintenance will ultimately prove unsustainable. The sole function (mission, value, meaning, or historical responsibility) of university libraries is service innovation—to overturn tradition, break the status quo, and open up the future. How, then, can university libraries specifically introduce or generate new elements? How can they create new combinations to change the service production function and implement creative destruction? (1) At the leadership level, measures to promote and implement service innovation mainly include: formulating reasonable library business plans; designing and transforming library vision, mission, and core values; designing and transforming library function systems; expanding library space resources; absorbing useful external books, emerging technologies, and excellent librarians; optimizing the allocation and utilization of various existing internal resources such as librarians, books, space, and technology; and discovering, cultivating, stimulating, and releasing librarians' creativity, transforming potential creativity into actual creative power and service innovation output [13]. (2) At the organizational function level, main measures include: in terms of systems, implementing standardization, proceduralization, and standardization for routine work, emphasizing scientific management, while simplifying administration and delegating power for innovative, exceptional work, advocating humanism, enabling librarians to "follow their inclinations without transgressing boundaries"; in terms of structure, placing the right people in suitable positions, reasonably matching responsibilities, rights, and interests, actively promoting decentralization, and adopting new task structures such as project teams and network groups; in terms of culture, promoting learning cul-

ture and humanistic culture to create a relaxed and free innovation atmosphere; and in terms of mechanisms, improving and strictly implementing training, evaluation, and reward-punishment mechanisms. (3) At the individual librarian level, main measures include: advocating individualism and self-management, expanding librarian autonomy, highlighting spontaneous order, and enhancing individual independence, autonomy, and freedom, while discovering and cultivating individual interests, hobbies, and specialties. Indeed, throughout the entire librarian corps, the library director, as the leader of the university library, engages in uncertain exceptional work whether in foresight or discovery, overall planning or organization and implementation, making them the most creative and most in need of entrepreneurial spirit. Moreover, the director influences organizational functions and library business planning among many other important tasks, thus playing an extremely important role in promoting and implementing service innovation.

In conclusion, service innovation is both a process and product of freedom, requiring a relaxed foundational environment, good service innovation mechanisms, excellent librarians, and outstanding leaders. It requires favorable conditions; when conditions are sufficient, service innovation will naturally occur. Service innovation is the flower of freedom and the fruit of civilization.

## 7 Conclusion

From print to electronic resources, from physical to virtual-real spaces, from manual to automated, intelligent, and digital-intelligent service technologies—the history of university library development is a history of continuous service innovation. The future has arrived. The digital-intelligent trend/context presents many challenges and opportunities for university library operations. Numerous new technology-based service institutions have emerged, some university libraries have outsourced their operations or directly renamed themselves information centers, and the status of libraries within universities is becoming increasingly marginalized. Only through continuous service innovation can libraries reduce service costs, improve service efficiency, enhance service quality, meet readers' constantly changing needs, elevate libraries' influence and voice, and solidify the practical foundation for the legitimacy of library science as a discipline.

The basic assumptions of university library service innovation are: environmental uncertainty, where the existing is or will soon become obsolete. The working foundation is: planned, systematic elimination of old, declining, and outdated elements, never spending resources to defend past (successful) practices. The basic prerequisites are: freedom, funding, leisure, and intellectual interest—only thus can the purity of service innovation work, the diversity of service innovation thinking, and the trial-and-error nature of service innovation practice be maintained. The most underlying logic is: respecting librarian humanity, respecting facts internal and external to university libraries, respecting service innovation logic, and respecting the basic laws of service innovation—that is, respecting

all objective existence related to library service innovation. Although the ultimate success of service innovation is enticing, it must be said that the process is fraught with uncertainty, generates substantial opportunity costs and sunk costs, and most likely ends in failure. Therefore, systematic planning is needed to create a favorable service innovation environment, stimulate and release librarian creativity, employ multiple service innovation methods simultaneously, and manage service innovation risks.

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