Webinar 4: Three Chinese Academic Libraries’ Experiences during the COVID-19 Outbreak

Cornell University Webinar Series: How Academic Libraries Can Contribute to Global Development

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This webinar focused on actions that the academic libraries took during the COVID-19 outbreak in China. Two of the libraries are in Wuhan, the epicenter of the pandemic, and one in Beijing. Their work demonstrates how academic libraries can help during a public health crisis. This webinar was jointly organized by Cornell University Library and Tsinghua University Library. The meeting was conducted entirely in Chinese. A total of 142 librarians attended the webinar meeting and 46 questions were raised.

A group of bilingual librarians have summarized the key points in English below.

Host and Moderator

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Speakers

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Liren Zheng
How Wuhan University Library Copes with COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study

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Minutes taken by Stephen Qiao
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Basic Facts about the Library

Established in 1893, Wuhan University is among China’s top-tier universities. The university is located in Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei Province, with more than 90,000 undergraduate and graduate students as well as 7,000 faculty and staff on four campuses. The university’s library system has four libraries with a total collection of printed materials of 6.6 million items and e-resources of 10.7 million items.

Strategies for Coping with the COVID-19 Pandemic

To help prevent the spread of the coronavirus outbreak and prioritize the safety and wellbeing of users and staff while providing non-stop services, the library took quick actions after comprehensive control measures were rolled out in Wuhan on January 23, 2020. The library announced a temporary closure of all the libraries on the morning of January 23, followed by thorough disinfection measures in library facilities. The library conducted daily check-ins on the health and wellbeing of its current staff of 286 employees and 270 retired employees. The library also provided assistance for staff, including psychological consulting service.

Library Services during the Pandemic

1. Ensure the smooth operation of online resource access by a.) monitoring the operation of servers daily to resolve any technical issues, b.) expanding the capacity of remote access (VPN, CRASI Shibboleth, MyLOFT, etc.), c.) strengthening non-stop reference and consulting services for online resource usage, d.) expanding the coverage of online resources to include temporary opened databases, and e.) recommending e-resources in different categories and promoting them to users via social media apps like WeChat, Weibo and other apps.
2. Support online teaching and online learning by understanding the need for textbooks, online teaching platforms, and course-related resources.
3. Engage in online information literacy education through a.) offering credit courses (5 courses, 400 students), b.) organizing training webinars to teach users how to use Note Express (similar to Endnote), c.) selecting resources for dissertations and theses and for access to e-resource from off-campus locations, and d.) producing videos and graphics, etc.
4. Recommend relevant reading materials (e-books, music, and films) to help users cope with anxiety and stress. Encourage interactions among users via various library-organized activities.
5. Reach out to communities by a.) donating printed leisure magazines and books, offering free access to e-books and audio books to makeshift hospitals and quarantine stations, b.) providing resource support to medical care workers upon request, c.) coordinating the distribution of donated materials in and out Wuhan.

6. Get ready for re-opening by a.) stockpiling PPE and disinfecting products for at least one and half month’s usage, b.) installing infrared thermometers at the entrance of the library, c.) planning for crowd control through social-distancing compliant seat re-arrangement, d.) ordering new book-disinfecting equipment through donations.

Summary of Q&A

How did your library respond to users needing access to collections? What actions were especially appreciated by users?

The library made all efforts to guarantee the accessibility of e-resource databases. The library also collected and promoted temporary opened e-resources. Users appreciated these actions.

How did your library meet reference and teaching needs? What actions were especially appreciated by users?

The library provided online reference services on a daily basis through different means. The library offered electronic textbooks, teaching platforms, and courseware platforms to support online teaching. The library also provided and promoted services via our website and social media platforms, like WeChat (97,000 followers), Weibo (36,000 followers), and subject Q-groups. The following actions were most appreciated by users: 1) on-time announcement of excusing overdue library materials, 2) on-time response to users’ requests and reference questions, especially in the evenings, 3) expanded channels for remote access of e-resources, and 4) online instructions for how to use e-resource searching and managing tools.

What user needs were surprises for you and how did you address them?

Surprise requests included citation service, new technological literature searching, and document delivery services. Our solutions: Address the needs case by case, collaborate with other departments, and gradually resume services that were not available in the early stage of the pandemic.

What actions were especially important for coordinating services during the outbreak?

The actions were especially important for coordinating services during the outbreak, including online services for the reference team, and coordination among different departments, such as reference, circulation, and system maintenance.

If you were to do this over again, what are the things your library would do differently?

We closed the library in a rush. Some users’ items/requests could not be handled in a timely fashion. There is room for improvement in setting and shutting down servers, user-authorization management, change-of-email notification, and the shutdown of the citation service system.

Please give libraries in North America one advice.

Protect yourself and patrons by all means.
Final Thoughts

These are some of the difficulties for the library and the library staff to cope with during the COVID-19 pandemic:

1. The shortage of hardware and IT support for staff to work from home
2. Lack of access to printed collections in the library and the limited quantity of electronic textbooks and teaching-related resources
3. A huge accumulation of unprocessed materials in the library waiting for receiving, cataloging, and physical processing
4. A big impact on collection development of foreign language materials as international shipping and receiving services are suspended or delayed

Reflections on Emergency Services of a University Library

Yuan Qing
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Minutes taken by Susan Xue
University of California at Berkeley

On January 23, 2020, the Wuhan Covid-19 Prevention and Control Headquarters issued its first notice that Wuhan City was going to be in lockdown. The Huazhong University of Science and Technology Library system, consisting of three large libraries, closed on the same day. During the lockdown, the library developed and implemented five types of services. We encountered challenges and learned how to improve our emergency services in the future.

Services

1. Facilitate remote access to digital resources and temporary free resources via:
   - Campus VPN
   - Campus proxy server
   - Shibboleth
   - Roaming account, which was registered by email address

2. Integrate and promote the following scholarly resources:
   - Free digital resources offered during COVID-19
   - Major digital resources such as WOS, Elsevier, and ACM
   - Digital teaching resources as well as searching strategy for teaching materials
   - OA publications on COVID-19, including resources put together by The Lancet, Springer Nature, JAMA, Wiley, and BioWorld

3. Develop and promote the following online teaching and reference services:
   - Updated FAQs pertaining to remote access to library resources
   - Seminars taught by faculty through library website
   - Library seminars and instructional classes
   - Reference consultations
4. Monitor and report academic achievements
   - Publish *Newsletter of Huazhong University of Science and Technology Disciplinary Analysis*, to track academic achievements of faculty and students

5. Donate books to support fighting COVID-19

**Challenges**

- One big challenge the library encountered when providing services entirely online was coordinating among internal departments of the library, as well as coordinating with campus departments. It involved the IT department, resource providers, network center, and library administration. Basically, the entire library and some campus departments have been involved.
- Librarians faced challenges, as well, when providing services entirely online, including, but not limited to, organizing activities and classes online, delivering instruction online, and designing topics.
- Another challenge was that there was no one clear channel to reach out and publicize library events and activities. The Library has used the Library WeChat account, the university WeChat account and other administrators’ emails to publicize the library’s events and activities, however, users still found it confusing on where to find right information.

**Areas of Improvements for Emergency Services in the Future**

1. We should recognize the importance of emergency services and include the strategy of dealing with it in our future planning and implementation. We have emergency plans for fires and floods, and we should develop a plan for managing emergency services. Such a plan should be integrated with the library’s regular policies, so we have rules to follow. Current experience also taught us that flat operation would work better than piecemeal operation [driven by organizational structure of departments and responsibilities]. It is also important to review our current work on emergency management to improve our operations in the future.

2. We should improve our capability of providing remote access to digital resources. The library has relied heavily on VPN access, which was proven to be insufficient in responding to this emergency. When acquiring digital resources in the future, we need to negotiate setting up remote access through multiple channels, to ensure remote access is not be affected by space and time. When a major emergency occurs, we need to contact digital resource providers right away to get permission to increase the range of IP addresses and to allow remote access through other channels. We need to consider acquiring more digital resources during an emergency.

3. We need to consider defining library users in different groups and levels, and tailor our services to align with their different needs. To support research needs, we need to improve accessibility to digital research resources. One option is to develop special methods for remote access during emergencies, such as building a one-stop service platform like MyLOFT created by IGROUP. We also need to collect and organize resources by subject and create user guides. To support paid online services such as searching new developments in science and technology and searching patents, we need to improve ID authentication and payment management. To support teaching, we need to establish and improve our system of online teaching resources, integrate library resources with faculty’s curricula, so as to extend digital resources to the classroom. In the meantime, the library needs to fully utilize its website and WeChat account and to develop online training classes to help users improve their information search strategy. To support the library
administration’s decision-making, we need to establish cloud storage for relevant data and track the development of policies, regulations, and academic achievements.

4. We need to build a reference platform based on users’ needs. A university library needs to reach out to other departments on campus, seek their support, and learn their different information needs arising from their different disciplines. Based on the knowledge gained, the library needs to re-visit our service program and explore how to build a reference service platform, including intelligent QAs, interaction with users, and personalized reference services. A services plan that responds to emergencies should be included in the overall plan for public and reference services. The service model would include a main reference service platform, supplemented by other services models.

5. We need to improve librarians’ capability to provide emergency services. To provide emergency services well, librarians should be sensitive to hot topics, understand information needs accurately, organize resources effectively, and be able to communicate and coordinate quickly. The library needs to provide learning opportunities for librarians: a.) professional development which includes collecting, organizing, and evaluating information resources, b.) training in online teaching, such as creating teaching videos and MOOCs, and c.) training in comprehensive skills to deal with emergencies, including recommending reading lists, planning online activities, and dealing with psychological issues after emergencies.

How to respond to an emergency is a test of a university library’s management capability, technology, coordination, and librarians’ professional skills. A major issue experienced by university libraries in Wuhan during COVID-19 were the urgent need of improving our capacity to provide online services while reducing the reliance on physical space. Urgent agenda items include establishing an online resources system to support teaching, building an intelligent online reference platform, and improving remote access to digital resources. After COVID-19, we need to review lessons learned, revise service policies, and integrate emergency management mechanisms into our regular management operation. We also need to pay attention to some potential issues, such as acquisition and cataloging operations, which heavily rely on physical space, and collecting data related to the library’s daily operations. The most effective strategy to improve emergency services in the future is to plan ahead, enhance the management of library operations, improve librarians’ knowledge and skills, explore new processes for online operations and online services, and implement cloud storage and cloud operations.

Keeping Library Services Functional during the Pandemic Period
Measures adopted by Tsinghua University Library to Combat the COVID-19 Outbreak

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Minutes taken by Liren Zheng
Cornell University Library

Tsinghua University Library is composed of a main library and six branch libraries (West Branch Library, North Branch Library, Humanities and Social Sciences Library, Law Library, Fine Arts Library, and Finance Library). Its normal library operations were interrupted by the sudden COVID-19 outbreak, and as a result the whole library system has been shut down since January 27, 2020.
To maintain its contacts with its constituencies, the library immediately issued three service guides for:

- Library remote services
- Contacting librarians
- Document search assistance

A library public WeChat account was also set up to facilitate communication.

A central leadership team was organized to supervise the following six working groups for:

- Internet resource supply
- Electronic teaching materials
- Electronic technical support
- Network services
- Public communications
- Logistic support

All of the staff stayed at their regular posts to provide on-call service.

During this period, the library has emphasized its services in the following pursuits:

1. Provide convenience for remote visits:
   - Update the remote-visit control system
   - Use Shibboleth, SSL VPN, personal iPhone roaming accounts, campus network IP, and MyLOFT to identify visitors
   - Entirely revise and update databases and webpages
   - Assign subject librarians to take on responsibilities for revising and maintaining websites

2. Ensure electronic material supplies for teaching:
   - Guarantee electronic teaching materials via purchasing and subscriptions
   - Extensively collect relevant materials from public domains and other channels
   - Deliver electronic documents through the Balis system
   - Utilize vendors’ database trial periods to expand scopes of teaching materials

3. Enhance online services for reference, training, and other activities:
   - Answer email, WeChat, and telephone inquiries
   - Provide training for librarians who have been engaged in online teaching
   - Provide individual assistance via iPhone
   - Organize libraries’ lectures and workshops via webinar
   - Host various Zoom activities, including salons, book readings, and culture months

On March 30, 2020, the library opened the automatic book borrowing and returning system to avoid physical contact. Books have been sterilized before loaning and returning.

The COVID-19 crisis is unprecedented in Tsinghua University Library’s history, and Tsinghua librarians bravely rose to the challenge. They have:

- Considered the challenge as an opportunity for new initiatives.
- Worked as a team to prevail
- Taken care of each other on the battlefield
- Explored new working modes through discussions
- Cooperated on various fronts and shared experiences
- Exploited this opportunity to improve themselves

Looking forward to the future, Tsinghua University Library will continue to focus on:

- Patron interests
- Material building
- Service quality
- Technology improvements

The library will also do more to:
- Integrate various resources
- Make them convenient to be used
- Respond to patrons quickly
- Instruct users effectively
- Fit into Tsinghua’s academic environment