



Providing government information and services in the Chinese public library

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Abstract:

What will public libraries do to provide government information for the public as government websites become the major channel of government information, when they have no tradition of government publications collection and provision? This article outlines some feasible methods and potential obstacles of government information services for public libraries in China on the basis of a current situation analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Along with the government information opening and "government online" program in China, there are more ways for Chinese people to obtain government information to meet their increasing needs. However, the open system of government information in China is just getting under way^①, there are still a lot of problems left to be solved, such as obstacles of information opening and sharing;^② and the lack of efficient methods for distribution of government information successfully into the hands of those who need it. Various investigations show that there is still a long distance between the services of government information and the expectation of the citizens.

According to some studies, the efficiency of government information provision and services is limited by the patterns of existences and organizing of government information, the user preference of public, etc. Though the government information opening is government-dominant, how to broaden the channels and scope of information dissemination to ensure pervasive acquirement and use of information resources requires efforts from all over the society, including librarians, at the stage of being when one-stop service is still a goal of government websites construction.

Public libraries in many countries have traditionally preserved and provided free access to government publications, and now it is believed that public libraries and the Internet promote the

public access of government information together^⑥. Along with the course of Chinese government information opening, the Chinese library community also recognizes their responsibility in collecting and long-term preservation of government information, and try to do something safeguarding equal, universal and free access to government information and services. Fortunately, most of their attempts have been supported by the Chinese Government almost from the very beginning, because the Government also realizes the important roles of libraries and other public service institutions in government information provision and services. “Opinions of the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council on strengthening information resources exploitation and utilizing” (NO. 34th document issued by ZB [2004]) stated that “to boost government information publicity and government affair information sharing, and enhance the abilities of public information services” is one of the general tasks of information resources exploitation and utilizing. It also put forward that “... should take full advantage of government portals ... and archives, libraries, cultural centers, etc. to facilitate government information obtaining for the public,” and government agencies should actively provide necessary information resources for the public service institutions.

Moreover, “Regulation of the People’s Republic of China on the Disclosure of Government Information” (referred as the Regulation hereinafter) has offered public libraries a legislative authority in providing government information services: “Article 16 The people’s government agencies at various levels shall set up a place for consulting government information at national archives and public libraries, and equip with corresponding facilities to provide convenience for citizens, legal persons or other organizations to access government information.”^⑦

When libraries assist more and more people to access e-government services and interact with government agencies, they find themselves confronted with some problems. In America, “Libraries need support to maintain and develop the technological infrastructure necessary to meet user needs, financial support, and education to better provide E-Government services^⑧”. In China, besides these practical problems, there are also others associated with organization , mechanism and cognition that must be considered as Chinese public libraries have no tradition of government information collection and services.

CURRENT SITUATION IN CHINA

Collection and services of printed government publications

Chinese history of government information opening is relatively shorter, and Chinese public libraries haven’t attached enough importance to the collection of government publications, partly because a lot of government records called red-heading documents, were handed on through administrative channel from above to below, and finally pigeonholed in national archives. To collect this kind of documents in its entirety is hardly possible for libraries.

At present, there are two other channels to obtain government information in China: by marketing and through government websites^⑨. Publications, such as gazettes of government agencies at all levels, assembly of laws, administrative statutes, government almanacs, etc., published by presses of different government agencies, are available from commercial sources , only few of them are distributed to libraries by the presses or government departments^⑩. Public

libraries have to select them individually and order from a variety of vendors. Even for a library that wishes to collect this kind of publications, it is difficult to acquire them completely: some of them go out of print soon, and sometimes librarians are not even aware of their publication.

Government agencies seldom deliver their publications to libraries, especially small libraries, unless the library is designated to be a public access point for government information after the Regulation came into force on May 1st, 2008. This phenomenon results from the notion that libraries have no function of government information services, and it perpetuates the notion at the same time.

As for the printed government publications as library collection, librarians rarely treat them according to their peculiarities as a special collection, but acquire, classify, catalog and shelve them as periodicals, books or reference books separately, or collect and provide them as special local materials. There are no indexes, bibliographies or other search tools offered with them generally. Only the libraries which are appointed to be public access points display government publications in a special reading-room alone.

With the increase of public demand for government publications, libraries are confronted with many problems, such as how to develop a reliable, comprehensive and successional collection of government publications, and how to fill the vacancy of those publications issued before the implementation of the Regulation.

Portals of access to online government information

It's difficult for the Chinese Government to disseminate official information by providing printed publications freely for more than 1.3 billion population, so it indicates that "government portals would become an important channel to open government information" by 2010^⑥.

China is not a country with a high Internet penetration rate (19.1% by June 2008, lower than the average in the world, 21.1%^⑦). Because of network infrastructure and Internet access costs, it is citizens and businesses in urban areas and comparatively developed areas who benefit mostly from online government information and online services^⑧.

According to CNNIC (China Internet Network Information Center), there are 253 million Internet users in China by June 2008, with home being the most favored place of access to Internet (59.4%), followed by Internet bar, office and school, while only 0.5% accessed the Internet from other places including libraries¹¹. It is obvious that libraries have not played a significant role in supplying free computers and Internet access.

Of course, insufficiency of equipment in libraries is one of the reasons, though it is improving rapidly. According to Chinese Library Yearbook 2006, public libraries had a total of 64,235 computers, with 32,571 of them available in electronic reading rooms for public access in 2005¹², while the number of terminals in electronic reading rooms increased to 44,607 by the end of 2007¹³.

There are other reasons too. For instance, many libraries charge users fees to recover costs, though at a level lower than Internet bars. However, there are always a number of networked computers left unused in some libraries, and in other libraries users are charged for the services just because there are so many people lining up to wait for a computer. It is believed that if the service is free of charge, there will be too many people for the number of computers. How to make

the service known to public? or how to distribute free computers justly? The problems libraries in different areas face are quite diverse, but free service (or free for special groups, at least) is the direction many Chinese libraries are heading.

Assistances in the public access online government information and services and related propaganda

Government is such a huge and complex organization that citizens are often confused when they differentiate government information they need, even civil servants may not understand examination items and administrative procedures of other government departments, or how to apply laws, regulations or government documents to special proceeding. Whether the public make full use of online information and services, can't be separated from their awareness and acceptance of e-government, their capacity and apprehension of government information, their adaptability and readiness of participation, as well as the availability of resources, impacts of technology and so on.

The ultimate goal of government information opening and provision is for the public to make full use of information to meet their needs. Government information opened online does not mean it has already been serviced to the citizens or businesses really in need of it. Whether government could achieve the target to make information available to the public in a cost-effective and timely manner by this channel, is impacted by some other factors, such as the development of Chinese information and communications infrastructure, public awareness and acceptance of this means of information distribution, etc.

For example, do the public know about the presence of online information and where it is stored? Do they have the ability to search, locate, access and make use of it? "Lack of public awareness is one of the most consistent and overwhelming reasons reported for the under- or non-use of government information.¹⁴" So is it in China. According to the 2006 performance assessment of the Chinese government websites, 85.6% of government agencies at all levels had their own websites by November 30, 2006¹⁵. While according to CNNIC, there are 210 million Internet users in China, only 25.4% of them have visited government websites in 2007¹⁶. In January 2008, CCW Research conducted a survey in six big cities, including Beijing, and found that 57.5% of the respondents have never visited government websites, and 55.7% of this group thinks there is no reason to visit, 29.0% said they do not even know of government websites¹⁷.

The library community had already observed that it is an urgent task to enhance public awareness and use of government websites and online information, and the suggestions they advance are typically Chinese, such as using popular lectures held regularly in many libraries in all these years to interpret important policies the public concerned¹⁸, thus promulgate government information and websites.

Furthermore, according to CNNIC's statistical analysis, most of the Internet users who visited government websites belong to the more active users of other network applications¹⁹, i.e. those people familiar with Internet and various other web applications have a higher awareness of government websites. This finding stimulates some libraries to popularize basic knowledge of Internet and electronic resources, and help their readers with Internet application.

Organization and long-term preservation of government information

Because of technical, organizational, legal, financial, and political reasons²⁰, government information published and distributed online is vulnerable and easy to disappear. How to build an authentic, reliable and accessible online government information collection and maintain its sustainable development is now on the agenda of some Chinese libraries.

In America, “libraries have a critical role in E-Government not only as portals to access, but also organizing and categorizing information and providing the necessary tools and expertise to provide community service²¹”. Chinese librarians also have carried out some salutary explorations in locating, identifying, collecting and organizing government information in order to ensure the equal right of public access, and facilitate the accessibility and long-term preservation of government information. In 2005, the National Library of China initiated a mirror image program to preserve online government information gathered from websites whose domain name ended with .gov.cn. by regularly archiving these websites. Now we can search static and dynamic web pages, pictures and files in various formats on its Government Information Platform²². The National Library of China also announced that it will launch the first vertical search engine of Chinese government information, which is regarded as an “effective exploration” of the government information integration development by third party organizations^{23/24}.

IMPEDIMENTS AND CHALLENGES

After one year of implementation of the Regulation, some public libraries have made rapid moves in their government information services, while most libraries still stayed at the same place as one year ago: what they provide is still limited to the publications received from government agencies passively, the browsers of their connected computers link directly to the home page of their local government website, and their librarians can not solve troublesome problems on their own for lack of special training. As for the reasons, we identify as follows:

Shortages of space, funds, equipment, and so on

Providing government information services requires space, facilities, technology, qualified personnel and operational guidance. After the Regulation came into force, a lot of local governments had already stipulated government departments’ obligations in local policies. For example, in Yangpu District of Shanghai, government departments should not only provide government information (including various printed users guides) in an active way, but also provide the required technical support and staff training for access points to help citizens to find information and accomplish online transactions. At the same time, the points are required to provide free Internet access, guidance, interpretation and other assistances for the public when they are searching information of the District government agencies or applying for special information opening.²⁵

So the Regulation presents libraries opportunities to win government supports in equipment, technology and profession, as long as the local governments trust them and appoint them to be public access points. While whether they are appointed or not depends largely on the public praise of libraries’ current services and their status in the eyes of local government agencies and local people.

However, it doesn't appear optimistic at present. According to many scholars, the Regulation only proclaims obligations and responsibilities of government agencies, without an express provision of public libraries as public government information providers. And to many of them, it is legal for government agencies to select national archives to be public access points without mentioning libraries, because it is not written in the Regulation that government agencies should supply information to both national archives and public libraries simultaneously²⁶. In a seminar on the Regulation and its implement in 2007, some experts from the political legal community indicated a fact based on their investigations: the majority of local government agencies think it is difficult for them to choose public libraries as public access points, because libraries do not have the function of managing government publications, and the staff are not familiar with government publications; others suggested that "libraries are more dependable in big cities, while government agencies in small and medium-sized towns and cities should rely more on archives because there are probably not enough facilities in libraries there²⁷."

Thus it can be seen that the Regulation brings nothing more than an opportunity, there would be no great change if libraries wait for the government agencies to supply what they need without striving for the opportunity positively. Those who are weak remain weak permanently. Small and medium-sized libraries, which are always short of resources, must take full advantage of what they have to satisfy the demands of residents in the community and win the trust of local authority synchronously, or they would be stuck in a continual cycle of no responsibility for such a function and not qualified for such a function, and could never secure adequate funds and equipment to provide a higher level of government information services.

Librarians

Whether public libraries could seize the opportunity depends mainly on the complete change of our librarians' attitudes.

After ignoring the function for many years, even some librarians, especially those from front lines in small libraries, agree that the public library does not have the function of providing government information, because the public have no tradition of access and use of government information through libraries. Therefore, when they are told to provide services of government information by their superiors, they do what government agencies ask them to do without initiative. It is of little help to the individuals who can not search information themselves, while for those who can it is easy to find a substitute nearby. This kind of points would be of even less use as more government information becomes directly available via the Internet. When national archives are taking full advantage of government records and other resources they hold to expand their influence (through experiments of "Utilization of Current Document", etc.), it means to give up the opportunity if these libraries keep doing so.

Public libraries have to take the initiative to bring government publications and online government information into their collections and services, so they can play a role as irreplaceable access points through developing collections of government materials and providing Internet access in the course of Chinese government information opening. However, it would take time for some librarians, who do not know much about modern information technology in particular, to recognize that public libraries should fulfill its obligations to promote public access to government information, which is not confined to printed publications, moreover, part of it is not stored in

their library but housed on different servers of government agencies, and libraries are accountable for its collection and bibliographic provision though they have no privilege over other citizens or social organizations.

After ideas and service models for government information collection and services in public library of developed countries, such as the United States and Australia, have been introduced into China, now we should invest more focus and efforts into the domestic information needs and public behavior patterns, characteristics of Chinese government information, and explorations of information organization, long-term preservation and open services suitable to the situation of our country.

Problems in government information dissemination

How can government information be disseminated to those who need it urgently but who have no means of finding information or ability to search information themselves? One of the reasons why American public libraries can play a key roll in providing access to government information and services is that American “public libraries serve over 97 percent of the total population.²⁸”. While in China, by the end of 2007, there were 2,798 public libraries at or above the county level, 50,190 librarians worked for these libraries , and only 12.63 million reader’s cards were issued²⁹(while the total population of China is 1.32129 billion at the end of 2007, according to the National Bureau of Statistics of China³⁰). So if Chinese public libraries want to do something to bridge the Digital Divide in the world of Internet and online information, they must serve the majority of the population, which is still a target to strive after , though a library net with a range of geographically dispersed libraries has been formed on the whole.

As government agencies are increasingly providing information and services online, a part of the population, such as residents in undeveloped areas and groups disadvantaged in information obtaining, are at risk of being excluded from the benefited crowd. These people need professional help, and public libraries must pay attention to the needs of such groups in order to ensure equal access to public information. Wang Angen from National Advisory Committee of Experts in Informationization once proposed that “public services must be extended downward” to countryside and community, and the extension points should become the agents of public services³¹.” Public libraries, with a grass-roots network and a large number of librarians should be encouraged to share this duty.

Problems in government Information navigation

In America, Government and depository Libraries provide comprehensive guides on government agencies and search tools of government information in print as well as electronic format. Chinese people also need detailed navigation maps to help them locate government websites and online information.

According to CNNIC17 (issued in Jan. 2006), 23,752 ASCII names were registered in gov.cn by December 2005³², while by December 2008 the number reached 45,555³³. Be affronted with ever-growing number of government websites, decentralized government information and services provided by various government departments, government agencies try to provide general directories to the vast array of government information and websites in their portals, except that

their productions are often incomplete and not necessarily easy to browse. Some scholars specializing in jurisprudence recently suggested that libraries could provide government information cataloging and navigation service³⁴ -- a task some public libraries have already had on their shoulders actually, according to our observation in the past two years.

According to Chinese Library Yearbook 2006, there were 571 public library websites in 2005, though statistics indicate that they did not achieve expected results in government information navigation. In June 2006, among the 31 provincial libraries (excluding children's libraries), 4 had no official websites, and only 3 provided government information navigating and similar services through their websites³⁵. After the Regulation came into force we investigated twice, here are the results:

Number of libraries Date	home page unable to be linked to ^①	linking to government portals	providing government information navigation	providing paper government publications
August 2008	2	10	5	2
April 2009	3	12	9	4

At the same time, we found that most of the services were superficial: they link to local government portals or the pages of public information index directly. Everyone could find the portals or pages if he knows how to use search engines, then why do they bypass library websites? It is almost useless to provide local government portal alone nowadays when government portals can not provide one-stop services, and vary in the approach they design their websites and organizing their information, in addition to disregarding content relevance of information and connectivity of services. We think it is also of little use for libraries to copy local government information columns and categories, because the columns and categories vary so dramatically owing to the lack of basic norms and unified standards (for example, standards on government websites construction, government information issuing, classification and public information system directory, etc.) during the present time.

Generally, ordinary people are not familiar with the configuration, operation and services of government agencies. If we really want to enhance public access to government information, we should adjust our navigation services to help the public find the appropriate government information entrance quickly. For example, could we provide convenient one-stop access to information and services of thousands of government departments so the public could discover information they need without understanding the organization, function, geographical disparity of different government agencies? Could we help them browse by subject, category, topic, titles, keywords, names of agencies or any other way they like regardless of the places where information is stored?

However, it is not easy for a small or mid-sized library to do so, for a good navigation menu probably should be developed by libraries on the base of government information collection and re-organization. In other words, librarians must scour the Web to find and collect all useful links or clues of information to organize comprehensive Internet directories.

Problems in government information acquisition and organization

^① "home page unable to be linked to": including libraries without official websites and libraries whose websites closed temporarily for maintenance.

Some researchers notice that government agencies usually neglect information collection, processing and management, and public information service is random, fragmented and disordered³⁶. In order to meet the needs of the public, libraries have to collect and organize government information to provide services themselves. Now there are two problems they must solve: how to collect online information completely, and how to be admitted into government information opening system.

Libraries cannot wait for government agencies to provide publications or inform them of the location of new online publications, because the local government itself probably does not know the totality of what its departments are publishing, and there are no national or local policies to ensure libraries to be supplied with all of these publications. Therefore, the library community is looking for specific methods and concrete procedures to insure government agencies provide publications duly and willingly. The first thing many libraries consider is how to be understood, trusted and supported by local government. Suzhou Library got in touch with relevant departments of Suzhou City Government and reached a consensus quickly: information will be provided by the departments, be described and indexed by the library, and finally published on the library website³⁷.

Even though government agencies are willing to provide information they issue, what they provide is probably not complete. Libraries must explore additional ways to accumulate government publications as a supplement to make up for the deficiency. Of course, attention must be paid to the authority, timeliness and effectiveness of information resources to maintain the prestige library gains in the preservation of traditional paper literature and cultural heritages from of old.

At the same time, libraries are also impelling and participating in government-initiated resources management actively and appealing for the release of surveillance and relief measures in information opening. Government information organization and management should be led by the Government with an overall plan; programs initiated by public libraries should serve as a part of the general plan and the standards-based framework of national e-government. Libraries must submit to the management and coordination of the Government and adopt Government standards on government metadata, encoding schemes, etc. for future interoperability and resources sharing.

At present, the Government is setting various standards about government information, and basic databases are still in course of building. Many libraries request to partake in these projects. For example, according to the Regulation, administrations at all levels should compile and publish open government information directory, catalogue and annual reports. Heilongjiang Provincial Library seized the opportunity not only to assist government departments to prepare these documents, but also began to build a public service platform of government information with the support of the local government in order to facilitate government information collection, collation, access and permanent provision³⁸.

DISCUSSION

The Australian library community concluded that “Libraries, particularly public libraries, can enhance access and utilization of e-government and this access required greater funding” in a seminar in 2005³⁹. In America, ALA (2007) indicated that “Public libraries are part of the larger government fabric that deliver a range of E-Government services. ...The library community is

eager to work with the federal government in order to make E-Government as successful as possible⁴⁰.” Likewise, Chinese “public libraries are eager to be used by government agencies” when the latter are committing themselves to government information opening (-- title of an Legal Daily report about the Workshop of Government Information Services in Public Library sponsored by Library society of China in 2008)⁴¹. On account of poor equipment and lack of experience in dealing with government information, government support is even more crucial for Chinese libraries.

It’s notable that a lot of public libraries have been clearly aware of their responsibilities and position in the government information opening system, and try to prompt access to government information using their expertise in information collection, organization and services. Some of them have already taken a great step and have been acknowledged as an important resource and service center as well as a public institution with specialized knowledge indispensable for the local government.

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