Case Study of the intercultural communication of the National Library of China during the pandemic

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Abstract

Purpose: As information technologies and digital libraries have become mature, smart libraries will bring more convenient services to the public. Taking the National Library of China as a case study, the article reveals that the international exchange business of the library in the post-epidemic era has been transformed from traditional physical communication to online video communication as the major form supplemented by physical communication, and this transformation has in turn stimulated the development of virtual communication technology services, which has played a role in the construction and development of smart libraries.

Methodology: The research method of this paper is a case study which followed a questionnaire survey for collecting primary data. Part of the primary data involved in this paper comes from the author's work experience, and the other part comes from the questionnaire survey.

Findings: The demand for international exchanges has not declined due to the spread of the pandemic and the public is gradually adapting to online interaction. 95% of the people in this survey believe that the current overall experience of the NLC's online video international exchanges is far from expectations.

Originality/value: The analysis of the international exchange practice in the past two years has brought enlightenment to the development of library.

Keywords: International exchanges, National Library of China, intercultural communication, online video conference.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic that broke out in 2020 attracted global attention. Libraries around the world have actively taken measures to prevent and control the pandemic. The Secretary General of IFLA, Gerald Leitner, announced on September 23, 2020 that "the 2021 World Library and Information Congress (WLIC) will be held online, as part

of an accelerated drive to develop a new, more inclusive format for the most international event in the library calendar. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused, and continues to cause, major disruption to societies and economies around the world. Faced with this, libraries have shown extraordinary resilience and inventiveness to continue to serve users. IFLA is working to do the same, with enhanced online support to our members and volunteers. The pandemic also challenges us to think again about how we work, both individually and collectively, into the future (IFLA, 2020)."

2. Literature review

During March 2020, cross-website searches were conducted on "Chinese knowledge information website" (CNKI.net)[1] and "Wan Fang Data Knowledge Service Platform"[1] for journal papers, conference papers, doctoral dissertations and newspaper articles published between January 2010 and March 2020, and a total of 2,236 search results were obtained, excluding those that did not match the theme and those that were on international library cooperation but did not belong to the research of this topic. The search results of interlibrary loan and document delivery, bibliographic data sharing, etc. were excluded. 44 relevant papers were collected, including 38 journal papers, 4 conference papers, 1 dissertation and 1 newspaper article. At the same time, cross-website searches were conducted for journal papers, conference papers, dissertations and newspapers published from January 2010 to March 2020 with the themes of "museums & international", "art museums & international", and "memorials & international", respectively. 35 relevant papers were collected, including 13 journal papers and 22 conference papers.

The concept of "intercultural communication" was first put forward by the American anthropologist Edward T Hall in his book "The Silent Language" published in 1959. In the 1980s, a group of intercultural research scholars headed by W.B. Gudykunst and S. Ting-Toomey developed the theory of intercultural communication, and intercultural communication has become a complete scientific system. This theoretical system belongs to a branch of communication. In the field of culture and tourism, online intercultural exchange (OIE for short) has been regarded by many libraries as one of the important ways of international communication. After reviewing the literature, the research and practice of OIE in European and American countries have already achieved initial results (O'Dowd, 2007). In contrast, OIE research has not received enough attention in China, and related academic papers are rare. Scholars Lewis and O'Dowd (2016) constructed Systematic Descriptive Map of OIE research based on 54 empirical research articles. The key word map shows that there are 17 research on real-time communication activities (such as Skype, Text-based chat, web conferencing software, Pro, etc.), and 14 research on non-real-time communication activities (such as discussion forum, blogs, podcasts). This paper focuses on the field of instant communication, and

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1 https://g.wanfangdata.com.cn/perio/toIndex.do

the specific research object is "international online video communication".

"International online video communication" provides the means for international exchange activities. The online Video Conference System is an application system for long-distance collaborative office that enables two or more people from different places to transmit and share video, audio and data information through multimedia equipment and platforms for real-time interaction and communication (Jie, Yinans & Peng, 2021). International exchange is basically the interaction between citizens, institutions, and organizations from two or more different countries. During and after the pandemic, international exchanges through online video conferences were not uncommon in China. For example, in 2020, the NLC carried out 9 online international exchange activities. In 2021, the number increased to 19, with a cumulative duration of more than 50 hours.

Promoting emotional interaction between people in the cross-cultural context is one of the purposes of international exchanges. Emotion is the attitude or experience of people that reflects whether their needs are met. Positive emotion stimulated by happy experiences can increase the enthusiasm of people for interaction, while negative emotion because of unpleasant experiences makes people lose the interest and motivation for interaction (Ruixian & Jinghuan, 2004). As an emerging means of international exchanges for the world library community in the post-pandemic era, online video conference is also a new mode for emotional interaction. Compared with the traditional face-to-face communication, online video conference may create obstacles to emotional interaction.

3. Objectives of the study

In the context of the epidemic and the increasingly widespread use of digital technology, which has brought extensive and profound impact on human production and life, libraries in various countries have gradually realized that online video conference is the only way for international exchanges and cooperation, whether formal or informal. Over the past two years, libraries in various countries have constantly shared their practice in the new normality of pandemic prevention and control. During this period, online conference has replaced the traditional offline meeting. On that basis, this paper takes the international exchanges of the National Library of China (NLC) as an example to introduce and analyze the problems of interaction through online video conference among libraries and the enlightenment to the construction of smart libraries in the future.

4. Research Design

4.1 Research methods

The research method of this paper is a case study which followed a questionnaire survey for collecting primary data. Part of the primary data involved in this paper comes from the author's work experience, and the other part comes from the questionnaire survey.

4.2 Case analysis

International Exchanges through Online Video Conference: Case Study of the NLC. As a representative of national cultural undertakings, the NLC has always fulfilled the responsibility of international exchanges, telling Chinese stories in international exchanges and cooperation. The NLC should actively plan international exchange activities to consolidate and strengthen its relationship with neighboring countries and national libraries in key regions. The NLC has accumulated experience in international cultural exchanges in the establishment of the Silk Road International Library Alliance and the Silk Road Digital Library, promoting the bid to host the IFLA Congress, and hosting the National Librarians Conference in the Asia–Pacific Region. In the future development, it is necessary to understand and study the new era, new situation, and new technology, help the library to improve research and service through the good interaction with overseas personnel, shaping the international image of Chinese cultural. At the onset of the pandemic in 2020, to effectively prevent and control it and maintain the continuity of exchanges with the world library community, the NLC began to explore the feasibility of online video conference. A total of 9 online international exchange activities were held throughout the year.

The NLC held a video conference with the National Library and Archives of the Islamic Republic of Iran on May 19, represented by leaders on both sides to exchange ideas and share experiences in responding to the pandemic; sent staff to the Pagode Semantic Workshop jointly sponsored by the University of Ljubljana in Slovenia and Europeana on July 9 and 10; sent staff to the Dublin Core Metadata Initiative forum which was held in the form of video conference during September 14–25; held a video conference with the National Library Board Singapore on August 20, represented by leaders on both sides to share their respective measures against the COVID-19 pandemic and discuss future exchanges and cooperation; attended the "Asia and Oceania National Library Leaders' Conversation" on September 18, represented by the director who delivered a themed report on "Library Development during the COVID-19 Pandemic"; held the UK–China Library Forum video conference on October 27, which was jointly sponsored by the Library Society of China and the British Library, and attended by 500 delegates from 11 public libraries in China, including Shanghai Library, Zhejiang Library, Guangzhou Library and Taiyuan Library, and local public libraries in the UK; attended the "Reading Nation in the Digital and Global Transformation Era" international online reading conference organized by the Ministry of Culture and Sport and the National Academic Library of Kazakhstan, which invited over 100 delegates of the cultural field and libraries from China, Kazakhstan, Russia, Turkey, Hungary and Latvia; held a video conference with the National Library of New Zealand on December 10 represented by leaders on both sides; carried out the activity of "E-Book Month for the 30th Anniversary of the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between China and Saudi Arabia" from December 11, 2020 to January 11, 2021 on the Arabic-Chinese Digital Library, and launched the website of "Arab–China E-book Month"; and sent

staff to the 45th (online) meeting of the Directors of ISSN National Centres on November 25.

Since the normalization of pandemic prevention and control in 2021, based on the practice and experience over the past year, online video conference has gradually exhibited the advantages of convenience and timeliness, and has completely replaced offline interaction. A total of 22 online international exchange activities were carried out throughout the year.

The NLC sent staff to the extraordinary General Assembly meeting of IFLA on February 12; sent one deputy director to the mid-term online meeting of IFLA Asia–Oceania Regional Division Standing Committee on February 26, who submitted the Report on the Development of Libraries in Northeast Asia as the convenor of the Northeast Asia region; sent staff to the video conference for the 3rd International Bibliographic Congress organized by the State Public Scientific and Technical Library of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences from April 27 to 30, which was themed "bibliographic information in digital culture" and divided attendees into 9 sub-groups to exchange ideas on the development direction of national bibliographic centers around the world, regional bibliography in the digital era, the formation of bibliographic resources and the modern trends of information and bibliographic services; sent staff to the IFLA MLAS online meeting on April 30 to discuss the business and work of the section; sent staff to the online meeting of ISO/TC46/SC10 from May 10 to 12; attended the "World Library Associations" international seminar during the All–Russian Library Congress: XXV Anniversary Annual Conference of the Russian Library Association on May 19 at the invitation of the Russian Library Association, in the form of recorded video by the library director; sent staff to the meeting of the IFLA MLAS Standing Committee on June 22; sent one deputy director to the 13th Conference on Cooperative Development and Sharing of Chinese Resources held online by the Center for Chinese Studies in Taiwan on July 13-14, which was attended or watched by over 230 delegates from Chinese mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, the United States and the UK; sent staff who also worked in the IFLA to the business meetings of the corresponding units of IFLA from August 11 to 25; sent staff to the 86th IFLA WLIC (first ever virtual one) themed "Let's work together for the future" from August 17 to 19, which was divided into five sub-themes of "Libraries Innovate", "Libraries Include", "Libraries Sustain", "Libraries Inspire" and "Library Enable"; held the 4th China–Arab States Libraries and Information Experts Meeting online on September 1, which was attended by over 40 library directors, officials and experts from 11 Arab states and the Secretariat General of the Arab League and 13 Chinese institutions; held the first Conference of the Silk International Library Alliance in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province on September 2 in the form of online video conference, which was attended virtually by more than 30 leaders of national libraries and representatives of well-known cultural institutions from 27 countries in Asia, Europe, Africa and Oceania that jointly build the "Belt and Road" ,

as well as more than 30 leaders of libraries, experts and scholars in China; attended the webinar of the BRICS National Library Alliance held on October 15 during the World Expo in Dubai, represented by a deputy director who also delivered a speech; held a video conference with the National Library Board Singapore on October 25, represented by leaders on both sides to share their respective measures against the COVID-19 pandemic and discuss mid and long-term development plans; participated in the "Looking forward to our future: overall development plan of libraries and archives – Asia and Oceania National Library Leaders' Conversation" on November 1 (represented by the director and one deputy director), which was also attended by the national library leaders from Singapore, Australia, Finland, Indonesia, New Zealand and the UK; attended the 18th meeting of the Cooperative Committee for Chinese Name Authority on November 9; attended the online meeting of IFLA-PAC (China, Japan, South Korea) on November 11, represented by one deputy director and other related personnel; attended the 14th Conference on Cooperative Development and Sharing of Chinese Resources online on November 15, represented by one deputy director; sent staff to the 46th (online) meeting of the Directors of ISSN National Centres from November 17 to 19; held a video conference with the National Diet Library of Japan on November 30, represented by leaders on both sides; held a video conference with the M. Rudomino All-Russia State Library for Foreign Literature on December 7, represented by leaders on both sides; and attended the virtual business meeting of IFLA Asia-Oceania Regional Division Standing Committee, represented by one deputy director who was engaged in in-depth exchanges.

4.3 Survey design

The author designed a survey questionnaire named *The NLC's Online Video International Exchange Experience Questionnaire.* The staff of the NLC who have participated in the international video conference. The purpose of this survey is to reflect the real feelings and needs of personnel at all levels of the NLC in participating in our library's online video international exchange activities and will use this as an important reference for the research of this paper. The survey took the form of a questionnaire. Questionnaires can carry out the required investigations from a scientific point of view and conduct effective data collection from understanding the respondents. Through the e-mail of the office system of NLC (http://www.oa.nlc.cn), survey was distributed to the staff of all professional titles, levels, and age groups indiscriminately, and the statistical results were obtained through the receipt. The quality of the survey subjects was high, and the survey results were true and credible. The questionnaire is divided into three parts: the first part is the basic information of the respondents; the second part is the understanding and evaluation of online international communication; the third part is the opinions and suggestions.

5. Findings and discussion

5.1 Findings from the case study

We can see the growth trend of online activities in 2020 and 2021 from the following graph. The author has made two conclusions on that basis. First, the demand for international exchanges has not declined due to the spread of the pandemic. Second, the public is gradually adapting to online interaction. Next, the author will briefly analyze the practice of online interaction.
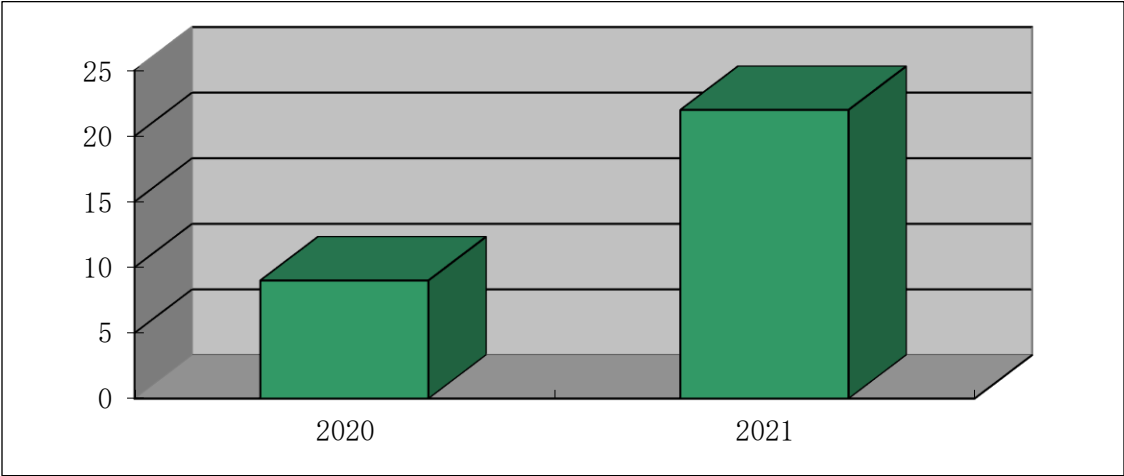

Figure 1: Number of online international exchange activities

5.2 Findings from the survey

Data summary: 95% of the people in this survey believe that the current overall experience of the NLC's online video international exchanges is far from expectations. As shown in the figure below:
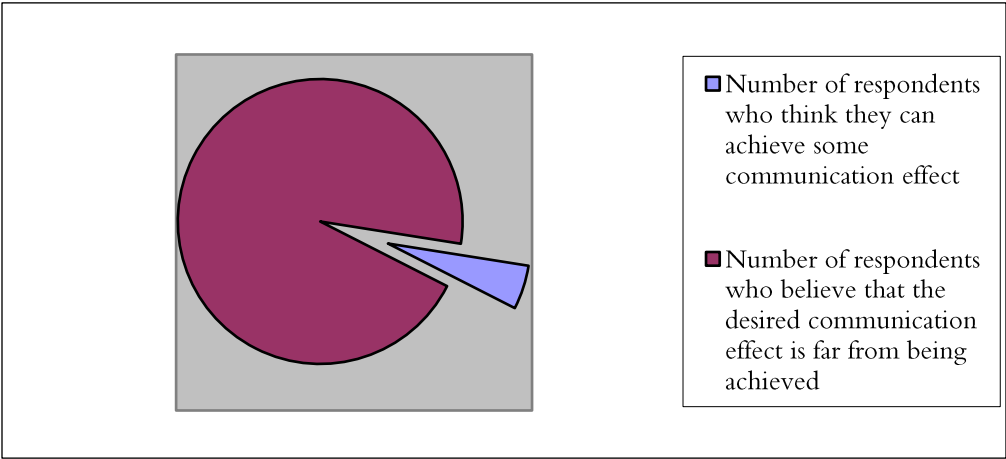

Figure 2: Overall experience of the NLC's online video international exchanges

85% of the staff chose to strengthen the training of staff when they were asked what problems the National Library should focus on in video international exchange work, to help librarians better understand and master international exchange skills. The exchange activities in turn promote the ability of the library's business work. As shown in the figure below:
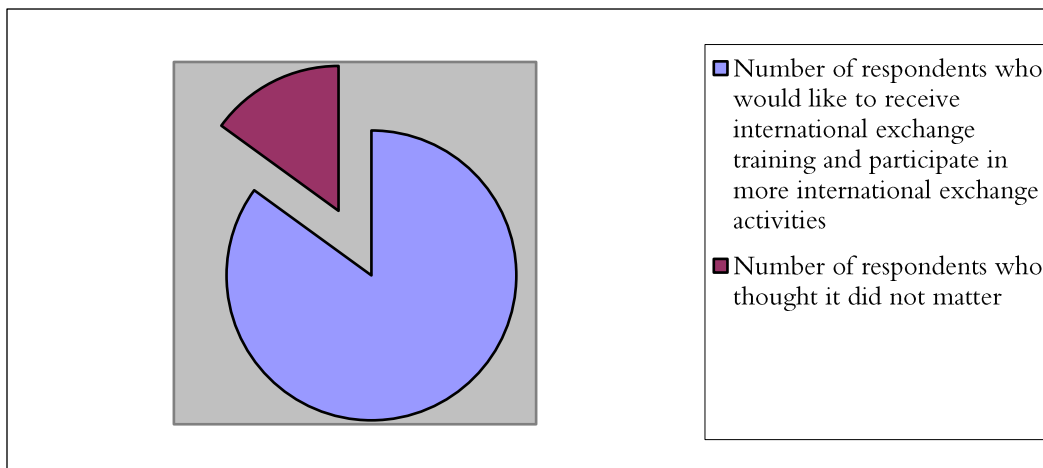

Figure 3: Respondents' perception regarding the international exchange training

6. Problems
6.1 The limitations of software and hardware technologies
Based on the practice and experience over the past two years, the NLC has chosen Zoom and Webex as the major platforms for international online video conference. In order to ensure the stability of communication during formal meetings, we usually evaluate and test the platform and the Internet in advance. To be specific, we confirm the following information with the technical personnel: the maximum number of participants allowed in the conference room; countries covered by the platform; the maximum number of participants allowed in gallery view; whether single screen display is supported; whether there is a forced mute function; whether the network bandwidth can meet the definition requirement of single screen display; whether echo and noise can be fixed; and whether the platform is secure.

In addition, if simultaneous interpretation is required for the meeting, i.e., when interpreters need to enter the meeting room through a separate account, then the other participants shall turn on the channel of their own language and mute the speaker. Therefore, the software and hardware technologies may determine the success of international exchanges from the physical dimension.

6.2 The limitations of virtual emotional interaction

We can divide virtual communication into two categories: one-to-one dialogue, and one-to-many meeting.

First, one-to-one dialogue. Due to the definition of image, frame size, signal delay and other problems of online video platforms, both sides of the dialogue can hardly read the eyes, expressions, body language and emotion of each other clearly. As a result, they cannot change the topic in real time according to the micro expression of the other side or tell whether his view is accepted in time, to make the conversation more targeted.

Second, one-to-many meeting. Only one participant talks at one time, who may not be actively responded by listeners, so the two-way emotional interaction is blocked. Besides, observers are free to turn off the camera, and the lack of discussion atmosphere easily makes the participants feel bored.

7. Suggestions
7.1 Support of software and hardware technologies
At present, a new round of scientific and technological revolution and industrial transformation represented by a new generation of information technologies such as 5G network, artificial intelligence, big data, cloud computing, Internet of Things and Blockchain are making further progress, and digital technologies are more deeply permeated into social interactions and daily life. Before 2020, the NLC used the video call function of various APPs during international exchange activities as a way of prior communication in the preparation and planning of major events. Such communication was small-scale and informal, but efficient. After 2020, however, the international exchange activities of the NLC mainly relied on the Internet, including meetings, signing ceremonies, forums, and other formal events. This has put forward higher requirements for the software system. Low-equipped system and unstable network connection cannot meet the current needs. It is necessary to invest in the upgrading of software and hardware systems. It is also a good way to hire professional personnel to provide technical support on site.

7.2 Stimulate the willingness of participants to interact
In the planning of content and process of online video conference, it is necessary to enhance the impact and appeal of the content. The deficiency of language can be made up for by means of texts, images, audio, and video, and giving play to the advantages of the Internet as well. More interactive sessions, such as Q&A and discussions can be arranged to stimulate the participants' willingness to interact. The meeting can also be held in the combination of real-time and non-real-time interactions. For example, the "2020 China-UK Library Forum" held by the NLC integrated high-quality speech videos recorded in advance and live discussion. While preventing the disorder of the conference, it can also encourage real-time interaction.

To carry out international exchange and cooperation, first of all, the international program of the library must be communicated to every employee, especially young employees, to help them combine their personal career development plans with the internationalization development strategy of the library. Secondly, we could implement an active talent incentive mechanism, develop a growth plan for foreign language talents, incorporate communication skills and foreign affairs performance into the assessment system, and effectively mobilize employees' enthusiasm for foreign language learning, computer application software learning and international exchange affairs. Finally, we need to create opportunities for foreign language talents to have contact with the international library, cultivate their international vision, give them space to show their talents, and enhance librarians' abilities with projects, while providing them with equal training opportunities or more international exchange opportunities to promote their rapid growth.

8. Conclusion

Currently, librarianship in China has entered a new stage of accelerated transformation from digitization to intellectualization. The Outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China and the Long-Range Objectives through the Year 2035, adopted at the fourth session of the 13th National People's Congress in March 2021, clearly requires to actively build smart libraries (The State Council The People's Republic of China, 2021). The goal is to realize the comprehensive intelligent transformation and upgrading of the business, management and service of the NLC and public libraries at all levels. Therefore, virtual international collaborative office based on video conference will surely become the direction of exchanges among libraries in the future.

Based on the practice of international exchanges through online platforms of the NLC, this paper has introduced their necessity, feasibility, and development trend, analyzed two factors that affect international exchanges, i.e., technology and emotional interaction, and proposed solutions for related problems. It is hoped that in the future, with the successful smart transformation of the library, virtual collaborative office across different countries with closer interaction and greater security can be realized.

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