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Japanese government libraries network: serving the customers in the new era

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Abstract

The National Diet (Japanese Parliament) Library, the sole national library and at the same time the parliamentary library, extends its services to the executive and judicial bureaus. The National Diet Library is clearly stipulated in the Law as the central library, with all the government libraries in the executive bureaus and the Supreme Court library as its branch libraries. The branch libraries form a network pivoted on the central library. It facilitates the dissemination of government information and library services: the central library acquires government publications via this network and serves them to the Parliament (and to the public as the national library); the branch libraries implement library services to the staff of their own bureaus, which are achieved by information sharing and exchange of publications based on the network.

The central library conducted a comprehensive field survey in 2005. The staff of the Branch Libraries and Cooperation Division of the central library visited the branch library in every bureau and interviewed the staff, using a set questionnaire. The survey showed that each bureau put a different emphasis on the roles of its library and they all have a different prospect for their future. The central library has just sent out a questionnaire to each branch library on their responses to the digital environment in terms of acquisition.

Staff members of the central library will be sent abroad soon to study the experience of foreign government libraries. Consequently, the central Library, after having discussion meetings with the branch libraries, will draw up a mid-term plan within 2006. The central library will also revise the 2nd Central and Branch Libraries Digitization Plan, which was formulated in 2001, to catch up with the rapidly changing digital environment.

1. Introduction

Dawn of the unique branch libraries system

The United States Library Mission, led by Verner W. Clapp, the then Chief Associate Librarian of the Library of Congress, and Charles H. Brown, the former President of the American Library Association, the then honorary Librarian of Iowa State University, arrived in Tokyo on December 14, 1947. They were requested by the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President of the House of Councilors to provide advice on the establishment of the National Diet Library, the future sole national library and, at the same time, the parliamentary library in Japan. They submitted a report to General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, in February 1948, which put emphasis on “Bibliographical research and reference services for all departments of the National Government” as a major function of the future National Diet Library. It recommended “the formation of a great coordinated system of government libraries, with the National Diet Library as the nucleus or keystone”. More concretely, it said that “if the National Diet Library is to serve all departments of the National Government, branch libraries will be required, as, for example, in the Supreme Court building and in the various Ministries”. “The objective of such a system would be to make any book owned by the National Government available to any official of the Government in the execution of his duties”¹.

Indirect surveys

The National Diet Library fulfills its function to offer library services to “all departments of the National Government” via its branch libraries. Therefore, the staff of each ministry/agency are, strictly and theoretically speaking, reachable by the National Diet Library only through its branch libraries. The interviews with the branch library staff, which were conducted in 2005 for the budget justification and then turned out to provide great insights and a basis for the new mid-term action plans to cope with the current environment, and other surveys, were organized in this context.

In this paper first the structure and the functions of the network of the government libraries under the branch libraries system will be explained. Some new achievements to reinforce the network will also be mentioned. Then the interviews and questionnaires

¹ For the full text of the report, see: *Thirty Years' History of the National Diet Library: Documents and Records*, National Diet Library, Tokyo, March 1980, p. 426-465

we have used to respond to the current challenges will be introduced. Lastly, the future action plans based on the survey results will be discussed.

2. Networking of the Japanese government libraries

Organization of the National Diet Library branch libraries system

In February 1948, the National Diet Library Law was enacted and the National Diet Library was established as the sole national library in Japan and also the research library for the Diet (Parliament). The law materialized the recommendation made by the Library Mission. The branch libraries system is clearly stipulated in the National Diet Library Law, with all the government libraries in the ministries/agencies and the Supreme Court as the branch libraries of the National Diet Library (article 2, 17-20)².

The branch libraries system, which is unique in the world, has been in operation almost 60 years since then. Today the National Diet Library operates 26 branch libraries in the executive bureaus (ministries and agencies) as well as in the Supreme Court. Of these branch libraries, three have their own branches (there are six of those altogether).

Roles of the National Diet Library

The National Diet Library³, as the central library, has been providing various kinds of support to the branch libraries.

Services

Library services: It provides library services such as copying, loan and reference directly to the branch libraries. In FY2005 it loaned 7,233 books and made filled 1,798 orders for copies. It responded to 476 reference inquiries.

Training: It provides various training programs customized for the staff of the branch libraries, including the training of new staff, a two-month long basic librarianship course, database search training, library visits, and lecture meetings.

² The National Diet Library Law is found at <http://www.ndl.go.jp/en/aboutus/laws.html>

³ The National Diet Library is often used to mean the National Diet Library central library in this paper.

Web magazine: It produces the e-journal “Biblos”, a community magazine for government librarians and other special librarians, and other publications.

Operation

It appoints the director of each branch library, who has dual status, i.e., belongs to both the legislature and the executive (or judicature) during his/her tenure. It also initiates various meetings. The National Diet Library also plays the leading role in drawing up action plans, developing network systems and distributing government publications, which will be mentioned below.

Networking of the government libraries

The branch libraries form a network centered on the central library. It facilitates the dissemination of government information and library services: the National Diet Library acquires government publications via this network and serves them to the Parliament (and to the public as the national library). The branch libraries provide library services to the staff of their own ministries/agencies, which are achieved by information sharing and exchange of publications based on the network.

The distribution of publications, both exchange and reciprocal lending of materials, the reference services and other wide-ranging cooperation among the libraries have been reinforced by the Central Library-Branch Libraries Network System (1998-2004) and the Central Library-Branch Libraries Integrated System (2004-present) and its developing Union Catalog Sub-system. They are available on the Kasumigaseki WAN (wide area network among the government offices in Tokyo) directly to the individual users in the offices.

Although the branch libraries system itself might seem quite centralized, each branch library is a distinct special library, which primarily provides the staff of the ministry (or agency/Supreme Court) to which it belongs to with library services. It belongs to its own ministry/agency in every sense, organizationally, financially and personnel-wise. The National Diet Library itself belongs to the legislature and the branch libraries system runs across legislature, executive and judicature, holding onto a fine line,

refraining from breaching the separation of powers⁴.

3. Challenges to the branch libraries

The almost-60-year-old system, which has survived numerous challenges, is now facing new information environments and is required to upgrade its functions to meet the needs of the customers in this knowledge-based society. The emerging e-government and the legislation for government information disclosure are major issues to be addressed, among the many challenges that confront the government at large, in respect of the libraries. The roles and functions of each branch library should be reconsidered and redefined so that it will be able to serve its own customers best.

Furthermore, in 2005, the National Diet Library had a more specific and urgent issue to be solved which motivated it to conduct a survey of the branch libraries, that is, budget justification. The National Diet Library has been negotiating the branch libraries resource purchase budget with the Ministry of Finance on behalf of all the branch libraries for decades, although the budget is included in that of each government ministry/agency. In 2004 the Ministry of Finance made a comment that the items of expense of the budget of each branch library were unclear and different from the others. It instructed the National Diet Library to clarify and unify the definition of the resource purchase budget of each branch library. At the time the National Diet Library had certain general ideas on branch libraries, based on annual reports, statistics and direct conversation during the meetings etc, but nothing specific, concrete or first-hand enough to deal with this or other issues. The National Diet library decided to take the opportunity and conduct a more comprehensive field survey, which would also help us learn how the branch libraries and their ministries/agencies are coping with the range of current challenges.

4. Interviews (May-July, 2005)

Two of the staff members of the Branch Libraries and Cooperation Division of the National Diet Library together visited the branch library in every ministry/agency and

⁴ For a full description of the branch library system, see: *Manual of Branch Libraries placed in the Executive Agencies of the Government and in the Judicial Agency 2005*, National Diet Library, Tokyo, March 2006 (Japanese only)

interviewed the staff, using a set questionnaire. The interviews started in May and took more than two months and were especially intended to find out the problems and needs shared among the branch libraries.

Questionnaire

The preparatory questionnaire for the interviews asked about budget-related matters, staff, customers, collection development, publications of its own ministry/agency, public relations activities for its ministry/agency staff, library system, plans and policies. Please see the English-translated version of the questionnaire attached to this paper.

Interviews

The questionnaire was sent to the branch libraries beforehand and then two of the National Diet Library personnel visited each branch library on an appointment base and apart from a few cases met more than one staff member there and interviewed them in a group session. Interviewees were the staff who were in charge of the management side of the library as well as the staff who took care of day-to-day library activities.

Some topics from the hearings

Resource purchase budget

The technical details of the budget issue are outside the scope of this paper. The bottom line here was, the National Diet Library had talked to each branch library and had started to share the understanding on the budget issues when the Ministry of Finance all of a sudden informed the National Diet Library that 2005 would be the last year for it to play a lead in budget negotiation on behalf of the branch libraries. From 2006 it will be taken care of by each ministry/agency just like other budget items. From now on the National Diet Library will find other ways to support the branch libraries budget-wise.

During the hearing a substantial number of the branch libraries expressed their hope to develop their collections and to purchase databases and e-journals together with other libraries. At the same time some of them thought it would be difficult because the fields of interest and the kinds and amounts of the library services the customers of each branch library require would be very different. The National Diet Library is now considering, for example, if it could make a scheme to purchase databases and e-journals for the branch libraries, too, when the National Diet Library purchases them. Forming consortiums of the branch libraries which have customers of similar interests will be encouraged, too.

Opening to new customers

The branch libraries put first priority on the demands from their own ministry/agency staff just like other government libraries the world over. Under the branch libraries system in Japan they are also widely open to the government staff of other ministries/agencies. This theoretical accessibility has been practiced in various gradations among individual branch libraries. One branch library expressed its unwillingness to participate in the Union-Catalog Sub-system on the Kasumigaseki WAN because it thinks its own staff are not its first priority; they are its only priority. Most branch libraries observed that, aside from their own staff, only the nearest ministry/agency staff come to use their resources. Only a few specific libraries such as the library of the Ministry of Justice are frequently used by other libraries.

Some ministries and the Supreme Court were willing to open their libraries widely to the public soon. The Supreme Court Library, a law library, is the only library which has not yet been connected to the Kasumigaseki WAN, while it has made available its online catalog on a nationwide network of the courts. It has been playing the central library role of the courts in Japan, though it was satisfied with being rather exclusive towards outsiders. However, the Supreme Court was thinking it would be an appropriate time to open its library to the public under new circumstances. The Japanese criminal procedure will be changed and will soon introduce a sort of jury system⁵. The Supreme Court Library catalog will be also available on the Internet to anyone.

24 hour-access

A few libraries were responding to 24 hour-access demands from the staff of their own ministry/agency. Those were not always the biggest branch libraries and were not expecting many users to come to use them after hours. Such service, however, is still highly appreciated by the ministry/agency staff.

5. Another questionnaire on government publications in the digital age (March, 2006)

The Acquisitions Department of the National Diet Library sent out a questionnaire this March to each branch library and asked about their responses to the digital environment

⁵ Ministry of Justice of Japan gives a brief explanation on this Saiban-in (lay judge) System at <http://www.moj.go.jp/ENGLISH/issues/issues03.html>

in terms of acquisition. The multiple-choice style questionnaire touched on what kind of role each ministry/agency is expecting its library to play when more and more government publications are published electronically, especially on the Internet.

Some branch libraries were well-recognized in their ministries/agencies in this aspect or were getting ready for the digital environment. However, in more ministries/agencies people seemed to think that other sections, rather than their libraries, would better take care of electronic government publications.

6. Study trip to the U.S. Federal Libraries: comparative study (March – April, 2006)

A staff member of the Branch Libraries and Cooperation Division of the National Diet Library (myself) visited some of the U.S. Federal Libraries (Department of Education, Department of Justice, Department of Labor, Department of State, Supreme Court) and the FLICC (Federal Library Information Center Committee) at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. to observe the customer services and other aspects of library operations in each library, especially focusing on the cooperative and networking activities.

This study was useful because, despite the limited number of the objectives, the observation of a third party showed us some clear patterns among the government libraries. After the interviews in 2005, the National Diet Library found itself in a rather chaotic situation when it came to how to deal with the replies. The interviews, in short, showed that the customers in each ministry/agency were quite different and each ministry/agency put a different emphasis on the roles of its library, although there were certain issues shared among the different branch libraries (see page5-6).

7. Cultivating the potentials of the branch libraries: drawing up future action plans

We conducted our assessment of the needs of our branch libraries through personal visits, a written survey, and then visits to US libraries to compare our libraries to US Federal libraries. From all of our assessment of our branch library needs we came to the following conclusions:

- It will be important for each branch library to reidentify, or sometimes identify for the first time, themselves and their own core customers. The identity or major characters of each branch library are not always very clear at the moment, unlike some of the U. S. Federal libraries. However, some may have a potential to develop themselves into a library for researchers inside and outside the ministry/agency. Another potential could be to put an emphasis, for example, on a law library aspect and allocate specialized staff for the purpose.
- Most of the branch libraries will still remain rather general, open to unspecific users mostly in their ministry/agency. Here a variety of internal PR activities, using websites, Kasumigaseki WAN or LANs, distributing brochures or providing user training etc., should be employed to cultivate potential users. At the same time they could consider widening their customer base and being widely open to the public.
- There are specific areas of concern, which the NDL heard of during the interviews and should be dealt with, for example, collection development in the digital era, space management, centralized acquisition system, introduction of contractors etc.
- The activities of the National Diet Library as the central library should also be improved; better operation of the branch libraries system such as more effective ways of holding meetings, possible direct PR attempts to the ministry/agency staff, expansion of library services, revamped training based on customer survey such as some step-up style training, are some examples. The future development of the present Central Library-Branch Libraries Integrated System and its Union Catalog Sub-system will be part of the major issues, too.

The National Diet Library will draw up two separate but related plans this year: the National Diet Library Central Library-Branch Libraries Mid-Term Plan and the Third National Diet Library Central Library-Branch Libraries Digitization Basic Plan. They will address the findings from the surveys and will contribute to improving the performance of each branch library as well as the whole branch library system. In the process the National Diet Library will have another first-hand hearing to obtain the responses and opinions of each branch library and make sure that the plans will be of some use to the development of the branch libraries in the next five years or so. The

National Diet Library is thinking that the plans will encourage each library to make its own action plan and to evaluate its own achievement.

It will still take some time before the National Diet Library submits the draft plans to the meetings of the directors of the branch libraries for discussion. The plans drawn up by the National Diet Library will be evaluated in its performance evaluation system, which started in 2004 to improve the library services of the National Diet Library and to make it accountable to the public⁶.

8. Past, present and future

The government libraries network in Japan was created during the war-torn, confused, and at the same time, future-oriented and idealistic period. Sixty years later it is now confronting new challenges in the digital world and needs to redefine and reform itself. The National Diet Library should play a leading role in reinforcing the network and each branch library will make efforts to upgrade library services for its customers. Taking advantage of the challenges it faces and utilizing new information communication technology, the old network will go on developing in the 21st century.

⁶ See http://www.ndl.go.jp/en/aboutus/evaluation_system.html for the NDL activity evaluation system.