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## Citizen Participation, Controversial Social Issues, and the Information Services of Public Libraries: the Perspective of Librarians in Taiwan

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### Abstract:

*Taiwan have experienced a lot of protests initiated by citizens including the demonstration and sit-in concerning various controversial social issues in recent years. Among the debates of different social controversial issues, most citizens obtain relevant information through news and social media. Nevertheless, are public libraries, an important source of information in the civil society, able to provide the general public with the information concerning them? We have conducted a survey research to the public libraries in the capital city Taipei and its satellite city, New Taipei City. 201 questionnaires have been distributed to the librarians in 107 libraries who responsible for conducting outreach activities, assessing their perceptions and attitudes about providing relevant information regarding controversial social issues among the public. The results showed, librarians agreed that it is the responsibility and obligation of public libraries to provide information and resources to citizens, and that citizens have the freedom of rights to obtain various types of information. The librarians generally agree that public libraries should organize outreach activities related to current controversial issues. Although issues regarding political orientation, public policies, ethics, and media freedom were considered controversial social issues by most of the participants, they felt these issues would not be appropriate for integrated into outreach activities of public library. This research is an exploratory and emergent study in the Taiwanese society. The preliminary research results can only serve as a reference to what kind of information provider public libraries can be in the course of the development in a civil society.*

**Keywords:** citizen participation, controversial social issue, public library, librarian, Taiwan

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## **Introduction**

Taiwan is a young democratic country and is new to get involved with controversial social issues and the idea of citizen participation. However, recent years have witnessed a lot of protests initiated by citizens including the demonstration and sit-in concerning the human rights in the military in 2013, the Sunflower Movement in 2014 leading to the occupation of the Legislative Yuan, the mass anti-nuclear protest, abolishment of death penalty, and the intense debates of marriage equality in the Congress and mass media, etc., which has cultivated the ambience for citizen participation.

Among the debates of different social controversial issues, most citizens obtain relevant information through news and social media. Nevertheless, are public libraries, an important source of information in the civil society, able to provide the general public with the relevant information concerning them? Considering the Sunflower Movement, for example, the Taipei Public Library held a book fair themed “Human Rights, Democracy, and Constitutional Reform” in May 2013, following the movement’s peaceful ending in April 2013. The books on exhibition were mostly on topics related to democracy, national organization, and the constitution. The exhibition also provided some historical information on democratic processes and activities. Although the exhibition’s intention was not to assist citizens to understand the causal relationship of the Sunflower Movement, it offered knowledge related to politics and democracy. It is worth noting that during the Sunflower Movement, Taiwan’s major online and physical bookstores were quick to curate special series of books on civil disobedience, citizen participation, and the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) for the exhibition, and significantly increased their sales performance. This phenomenon reflects the public’s information needs. If the response of businesses was this rapid, should public libraries, which exist for the benefit of the public, not compete with the exhibition for the attention of readers? In a democratic society where citizen participation is becoming more prevalent, should librarians of public libraries pay closer attention to various controversial social issues and also provide readers with relevant information?

Previously, most studies have discussed on libraries and controversial materials from the perspectives of collection development (Hupp, 1991), criteria or policies for collection selection (Hughes-Hassell, Overberg, & Harris, 2013), and library censorship (Taylor & McMenemy, 2013). Some studies have noted that public libraries refuse to purchase controversial books that are in high demand (Hill & Harrington, 2014) or discuss the librarians’ attitudes toward controversial materials (Chapman, 2013). This study examined librarians responsible for conducting outreach activities to determine how they view the relationship between public libraries and current controversial issues, as well as their thoughts and attitudes toward those issues.

In this study, librarians responsible for conducting outreach activities or the library managers in charge of public libraries in Taipei and New Taipei City were requested to complete a questionnaire survey to explore the following issues: (1) their perceptions regarding outreach activities, (2) their attitudes regarding holding outreach activities, (3) and their perceptions regarding controversial social issues.

## **Methodology**

We have conducted a survey to the branch libraries of Taipei Public Library, and New Taipei City Library, the public library of Taipei’s major satellite city. In November 2015, 201 copies

of paper questionnaires have been distributed to the librarians in 107 libraries who generally responsible for conducting outreach activities. In the end of December 2015, total of 110 librarians responded to the survey, yielding a return rate of 54.73%, of which valid questionnaires are 103 copies, the valid rate is 51.24%.

The questionnaire was divided into four sections. Sections 1 and 2 comprised questions that were measured using 5-point Likert scales. Section 1 contained 15 questions aimed at understanding the perception of librarians toward outreach activities. Section 2 contained 17 questions aimed at understanding the attitude of the librarians toward holding outreach activities. Section 3 contained five general multiple-choice questions aimed at determining whether the librarians at which the respondents worked in had ever held outreach activities, as well as questions about the librarians' perceptions regarding controversial social issues. Section 4 contained questions related to demographic information of the librarians, including their gender, age, professional background, and experience with conducting outreach activities, etc.

## Results

In total, 103 valid questionnaires were received. Based on the librarians' demographics, a preliminary statistical analysis was conducted for the following characteristics: gender, age, education, professional background, experience in conducting outreach activities, position, seniority, and seniority in conducting outreach activities. Table 1 shows the results.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Variables in the Analysis of Librarians

		N=103	
Characteristic		Number	%
Gender	male	18	17.5
	female	84	81.5
	missing	1	1.0
Age	20-29	22	21.4
	30-39	33	32.0
	40-49	29	28.2
	50-59	16	15.5
	over 60	3	2.9
	missing	0	0.0
Education	high school	23	22.3
	junior college	13	12.6
	college	52	50.5
	master	15	14.6
Professional Background	LIS	27	26.2
	education	3	2.9
	information science and technology	7	6.8
	others	54	52.4
Experience in conducting outreach activities	missing	12	11.7
	yes	75	72.8
	no	24	23.3
Position	missing	4	3.9
	manager	10	9.7
	librarian-outreach activities	41	39.8
	librarian-other duty	40	38.8
	others	9	8.7
Seniority (year)	missing	3	2.9
	less than 2	30	29.1
	2 to 5	22	21.4
	6 to 10	20	19.4
	more than 10	31	30.1

	less than 2	56	54.4
Seniority -- conducting outreach activities (year)	2 to 5	25	24.3
	6 to 10	11	10.7
	more than 10	3	2.9
	missing	8	7.8

### Perceptions of public library librarians regarding outreach activities

Taking whether the librarians have conducted outreach activities as the grouping variable, a descriptive statistical analysis and *t* test were performed; Question No. 10 was deleted following a reliability analysis. The results showed that most of the librarians agreed that it is the responsibility and obligation of public libraries to provide information and resources to citizens, and that citizens have the freedom to obtain various types of information; thus, public libraries should provide information on various social issues to citizens.

Table 2 shows that librarians also agreed that there is a specific correlation between the theme and type of an outreach activity and citizens' intention to participate; therefore, public libraries should implement new themes and new types of outreach activities. Furthermore, outreach activities held by public libraries could assist people in accessing information and enhance the knowledge and information literacy of participating citizens. Such outreach activities can not only attract citizens to use library resources, but also provide citizens a critical information channel for them.

Table 2 Perceptions of librarians regarding outreach activities

No.	Question	Mean	SD
1	It is the responsibility and obligation of public libraries to provide information and resources to citizens	4.23	0.782
2	Public libraries should provide information on multiple issues to citizens	4.08	0.776
3	Citizens have the freedom to access various types of information	4.35	0.591
4	Outreach activities held by public libraries are a critical information channel for citizens	4.01	0.798
5	Outreach activities held by public libraries give citizens access to information	4.17	0.742
6	Outreach activities held by public libraries can enhance the knowledge of participating citizens	4.20	0.705
7	Outreach activities held by public libraries can enhance the information literacy of participating citizens	4.01	0.810
8	The theme of an outreach activity affects citizens' intention to participate	4.39	0.598
9	The type of outreach activity affects citizens' intention to participate	4.38	0.562
11	Public libraries should implement new themes for outreach activities	4.05	0.677
12	Public libraries should conduct new types of outreach activities	4.01	0.721
13	Public libraries should take the initiative to procure books that provide information that citizens need	3.94	0.861
14	Public libraries should take the initiative to procure resources needed for conducting outreach activities	3.93	0.770
15	Public libraries can attract citizens to use their resources by holding outreach activities	4.22	0.713

## Attitudes of public library librarians toward conducting outreach activities

Whether the librarians had conducted an outreach activity was used as the grouping variable. A descriptive statistical analysis and *t* test were performed, and Question No. 17 was deleted following a reliability analysis. The research results showed that the mean score of this section was lower than that of the first section, with attitudes falling between Agree and Neither Agree Nor Disagree. Most of the librarians agreed that libraries would gladly conduct various types of outreach activities on various themes, and that different types of outreach activities and themes provide different types of information that influences citizens.

Table 3 shows that the participants agreed that the theme and type of outreach activity conducted by libraries were more influenced by the library managers than by the librarians-in-charge of outreach activities. By contrast, the books chosen for the outreach activity was less influenced by the library managers and the librarians-in-charge. The resources collected for an outreach activity should follow a library's collection development policy, and the participants agreed that following this policy when collecting books can assist public libraries selecting appropriate books for outreach activities.

Regarding the social issue aspect, the participants generally agreed that public libraries should coordinate with current social affairs to conduct outreach activities to help citizens better understand the relevant issues and their significance. However, that public libraries should hold outreach activities of related theme after a social movement has received a lower score; the consensus was also relatively lower than other questions in the same session.

Table 3 Attitudes of librarians toward conducting outreach activities

No.	Question	Mean	SD
1	Public libraries would gladly conduct various types of outreach activities with different themes	3.97	0.785
2	Different types of outreach activities with different themes would provide different types of information for citizens	4.18	0.556
3	It is the responsibility of public libraries to conduct outreach activities that citizens would approve of	3.53	1.083
4	The type of outreach activity is influenced by the library manager	3.71	0.925
5	The type of outreach activity is influenced by the librarian-in-charge	3.34	0.976
6	The type of outreach activity is determined through internal library discussions	3.73	0.795
7	The theme of an outreach activity is influenced by the library manager	3.70	0.838
8	The theme of an outreach activity is influenced by the librarian-in-charge	3.41	0.834
9	The theme of an outreach activity is determined through internal library discussions	3.75	0.710
10	Book selection for an outreach activity is influenced by the library manager	3.38	0.934
11	Book selection for an outreach activity is influenced by the librarian-in-charge	3.36	0.979
12	The resources collected for an outreach activity are determine according to the relevant acquisition plan in the collection development policy	3.75	0.710
13	The book selection standards in the collection development policy can assist public libraries in selecting books for an outreach activity	3.82	0.682
14	Public libraries should respond current social affairs (e.g.,	3.64	0.931

	diverse family formation, student movements) in conducting outreach activities to help citizens understand the related issues		
15	It is critical for public libraries to coordinate with current social affairs to conduct outreach activities	3.67	0.894
16	After a social movement, public libraries should conduct outreach activities with a related theme to help citizens better understand about the relevant information	3.45	0.943

### Types and themes of outreach activities

Table 4 shows that in the past 2 years, the outreach activities held by public libraries of the participants included 95 book fairs (92.2%), followed by 93 film screenings (90.3%), 92 lecture sessions (89.3%), 87 children’s reading promotions (84.5%), and 82 outreach activities for senior citizens (79.6%). Other activities include the promotion of indigenous culture and summer camps for kids.

Table 4. Types of outreach activities conducted in the past 2 years

Type of outreach activity	Frequency	%
Book fair	95	92.2
Film screening	93	90.3
Lecture session	92	89.3
Children’s Reading Promotion	87	84.5
Outreach activity for senior citizens	82	79.6
Book club	57	55.3
Outreach promotion of library resources	53	51.5
Tournament of festival	46	44.7
Drama & theatre	26	25.2
Concerts	10	9.7
Others	7	6.8

Table 5 shows that in the past 2 years, the themes of outreach activities held by public libraries included 87 Bookstart projects (84.5%), followed by 63 parental advisory classes (61.2%), and 59 handicraft workshop (57.3%). Other themes include health care and natural sciences.

Table 5 Themes of outreach activities conducted in the past 2 years

Theme of outreach activity	Frequency	%
Bookstart project	87	84.5
Parental advisory class	63	61.2
Handicraft workshop	59	57.3
3C Tutorial	30	29.1
Computer class	18	17.5
others	13	12.6
Calligraphy class	12	11.7
International culture exchange	12	11.7
Instrument class	4	3.9

### Perceptions of public library librarians toward controversial social issues

Whether the participants had planned an outreach activity was considered as the grouping variable. A descriptive cross-tabulation analysis was performed on three perspectives: whether the librarians generally paid attention to social issues, what the librarians considered a controversial social issue to be, and which kind of controversial social issue can be

integrated into outreach activities for the purpose of information dissemination in public libraries.

Social issues that librarians generally paid attention to were primarily related to the environment and ecology (72.8%) and the livelihood interest (56.3%). Compared with the librarians with experience in holding outreach activities, those with no experience cared more about campus safety, ethics, media freedom, and public policy issues.

Regarding the participants' perspectives on controversial social issues, 86.4% of them considered issues related to political orientation to be the controversial one. This view was held by 22 of the 24 librarians with no experience in outreach activities. Other issues commonly considered as social issues by the participants were public policies (42.7%) and ethics (39.8%). See Table 6 for further details.

Table 6. Librarians perception towards controversial social issues

Issues	Grouping variable	Frequency	Variable %	Amount %
Political orientation	Yes	67	89.3	86.4
	No	22	91.6	
Campus safety	Yes	11	14.6	12.6
	No	2	8.3	
Environment and ecology	Yes	19	25.3	23.3
	No	5	20.8	
Ethics	Yes	35	46.6	39.8
	No	6	25.0	
Livelihood interest	Yes	20	26.6	26.2
	No	7	29.2	
Public safety	Yes	11	14.6	15.5
	No	5	20.8	
Media freedom	Yes	24	32.0	31.1
	No	8	33.3	
Public policies	Yes	38	50.6	42.7
	No	6	25.0	
others	Yes	4	5.3	3.9
	No	0	0	

Regarding the controversial social issues that can be integrated into the outreach activities of public libraries for the purpose of information dissemination, environment and ecology constituted the highest proportion at 64.1%, followed by livelihood interest (39.8%), campus safety (38.8%) and public safety (38.8%). Compared with the participants with no experience in outreach activities, those with experience considered issues such as campus safety, ethics, livelihood interest, and media freedom to be suitable for integration with outreach activities held by public libraries. See Table 7 for further details.

Table 7 Controversial social issues can be integrated into outreach activities of public libraries

Issues	Grouping variable	Frequency	Variable %	Amount %
Political orientation	Yes	3	4.0	4.9
	No	2	8.3	
Campus safety	Yes	32	42.6	38.8
	No	8	33.3	
Environment and ecology	Yes	49	65.3	64.1
	No	17	70.8	
Ethics	Yes	25	33.3	28.2
	No	4	16.7	
Livelihood interest	Yes	33	44.0	39.8
	No	8	33.3	
Public safety	Yes	30	40.0	38.8
	No	10	41.7	
Media freedom	Yes	14	18.6	16.5
	No	3	12.5	
Public policies	Yes	19	25.3	25.2
	No	7	29.2	
others	Yes	3	4.0	3.9
	No	1	4.2	

## Discussion

The results of this study showed, generally speaking, librarians agreed that it is the responsibility and obligation of public libraries to provide information and resources to citizens, and that citizens have the freedom of rights to obtain various types of information. There is a specific correlation between the theme and type of an outreach activity and citizens' intention to participate. Hence, public libraries should implement current themes and novel types of outreach activities for their users.

The results also showed that the librarians generally agree that public libraries should organize outreach activities related to current controversial issues. However, their level of perception about controversial social issues varies. Although issues regarding political orientation, public policies, ethics, and media freedom were considered controversial social issues by most of the participants, they felt these issues would not be appropriate for integrated into outreach activities of public library. It means they might think that can be difficult for public libraries to conduct outreach activities about controversial social issues.

This research is an exploratory and emergent study in the Taiwanese society. The preliminary research results can serve as a reference to what kind of information provider public libraries can be in the course of the development in a civil society.

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