

## Do Public Libraries Have a Role in the Digital Age?

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to scrutinize the role of public libraries in promoting education and information literacy within local communities in the internet era. Public libraries, as bastions of knowledge traditionally, have not only fostered user education but have also been instrumental in delivering community information services. The paper delineates and evaluates the influence of public libraries on user education and community literacy initiatives. Despite the pervasive impact of digital technology, the findings affirm the enduring relevance and value of public libraries. They continue to play a crucial role in our digitally-driven society, actively fostering user education for the overall advancement of society.

Keywords: Public library, community information, library services, user services, information technology

### INTRODUCTION

What is the current status of public libraries (PLs hereafter), and how relevant are they in the digital age? This paper tries to answer such questions by exploring functions and significance of PLs in the era of the internet. Despite the widespread use of digital technologies, studies have consistently underscored the crucial role

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of PLs in providing community information services (McMenemy 2007; Aab 2004; Lor 2004; Barugh 1984; Satpathy 2006). Community information services, encompassing the transmission and distribution of information through PLs, remain pivotal in a digital landscape where information search and social interactions have shifted online due to the pervasive influence of internet technologies (Aab 2005a). However, as Manuel Castells (2000) argues, society and technology mutually enhance rather than define each other.

In nations worldwide, particularly in the developing world, PLs play a vital role in ensuring the accessibility of education, participation in knowledge societies, and engagement in the cultural life of communities (IFLA-UNESCO, 2022, p.1). Public libraries continue to provide a communal reading space and serve as shared access points to “published” material, retaining significance as reliable sources of print media. They contribute to the creation of social capital, linked to societal advancements such as freedom, democracy, and general well-being (Vrheim, Steinmo, & Ide 2007; Johnson 2012). Although knowledge is now widely accessible online, the function and value of physical books in PLs persist in this era of digital access, a topic this paper will explore further.

Addressing queries about the relevance of PLs in the age of Google and readily available digital knowledge formats (PDF, HTML), this paper delves into the unique goals of PLs, distinct from academic or research libraries (Audunson 2005; Audunson, Vrheim, Aab, & Holm 2007). PLs, beyond promoting community learning, serve as repositories of regional and indigenous information.

As information undergoes digital transformation, this paper assesses the current standing of PLs in supporting learning and knowledge sharing from a practical perspective (Aab 2005b). While digitized information is easily accessible, the appeal of PLs lies in their ability to house significant quantities of indigenous and cultural

knowledge. Emphasizing the importance of constructing new PLs in areas with low reading rates, the paper aims to bridge libraries with literacy efforts in local and international communities (Asselin & Doiron 2016).

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The paper explores the function and significance of PLs in our society, emphasizing the necessity of establishing additional PLs for the overall benefit of the community. Special attention is given to the importance of open access libraries, aiming to make a broader range of library resources freely accessible to the general public, fostering learning, and inspiring creative endeavours. The impact on users of PLs is also considered. The full potential of a public library can only be realized when individuals seeking relevant knowledge and information are granted unrestricted access to its collections and assets. As a result, this paper has three primary objectives.

- To re-evaluate the functions of PLs and assess their continued significance in the era of ICT.
- To explore the ways in which PLs can actively contribute to enhancing information literacy.
- To examine the role of PLs as central hubs for local information, aiming to understand their impact on community knowledge dissemination.

These critical research concerns guide the efforts to comprehensively assess the role of PLs in the intellectual development of society, approached from an academic standpoint.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

PLs stand repositories of knowledge, with librarians serving as knowledge managers. These professionals curate the information

within a library, ensuring that relevant materials are readily available to knowledge seekers at the right time, thereby optimizing library efficiency and operations (Worthington, 1999). The principles of library administration often adhere to Ranganathan's (1931) Five Laws of Library Science designed to enhance service quality with fewer resources.

Central to a public library's role as a learning institution is the facilitation of user education (Kumar, 2009). This user education is integral to social welfare, as PLs, open to all and providing free access, serve as invaluable resources for the general public, while also functioning as rich repositories for academics and researchers. In essence, PLs contribute significantly to fostering a culture of reading across all age groups. This paper aims to scrutinize how PLs promote social literacy and community education (CESL), reinforcing the idea that they play crucial roles in safeguarding freedom of expression and individual liberty in democratic societies (Jones 1999).

PLs are recognized for encouraging lifelong learning by offering diverse services to users from various societal spheres. Considered as educational institutions that promote a reading culture, these libraries necessitate staff efforts in understanding consumer needs and articulating how their services address those needs. The evolution of technology has ushered in changes for both public and academic libraries, with modern libraries rapidly adopting ICT infrastructures and the internet to disseminate information beyond traditional methods (Jaeger, Bertot & Fleischmann, 2011a). Integrated library automation and management systems are replacing conventional cataloging methods, although PLs retain their charm as havens for rare books and literary artifacts.

Beyond their role as informational resources, PLs significantly contribute to social advancement. They fulfill various functions, such as supporting education and self-improvement, offering a

diverse range of reading materials, encouraging original writing and artistic potential, providing community information services, acting as hubs for researchers and academics, promoting imaginative reading for leisure, guiding intellectual and cognitive development, and facilitating engagement in social activities. Additionally, PLs play a pivotal role in building social capital.

The paramount function of PLs lies in imparting knowledge and information as shared systems of knowledge institutions supported by contributions, state government financing, and public and governmental patronage. By providing compelling reading materials, they strive to enhance user education and serve as dynamic contributors to the intellectual and cultural enrichment of society.

In the face of digital dominance, PLs endure as steadfast reservoirs of knowledge, serving both social and intellectual spheres. They also function as community information hubs, bridging access to data in both analog and digital formats. The surge in the demand for information, catalyzed by the digital revolution, underscores the need for additional PLs, especially in rural areas with limited access to information and communication technology (ICT). As institutions of knowledge, PLs play a crucial role by offering free services and actively engaging in community information services, earning them the status of pillars of information literacy that foster universal erudition, free speech, and individual and societal liberty (Jones 1999).

Books, recognized as paramount learning tools, represent the primary focus of educational resources provided by libraries. The overarching goal of every public library is to enhance user services, cultivate a culture of learning, and promote self-education, facilitating both formal and informal learning methods (Meyers, Erickson, Small, 2013). Throughout history, PLs, often referred to as "athenaeums", have actively contributed to community

information services aligned with literacy ideals, thereby supporting community education and social learning.

PLs are instrumental in promoting information literacy and cultivating social capital (Das and Lal, 2006; Vrheim, 2009; Johnson, 2012). The ongoing ICT revolution has transformed the landscape of accessing information, shifting it predominantly online. This essay delves into the ways PLs harness the digital revolution to offer community information services. Amid these changes, reader satisfaction emerges as a critical factor deserving attention.

Readers in PLs exhibit varying degrees of familiarity with the sources they seek, with some having clear objectives while others require assistance in their search. The automation of library services, in strict adherence to Ranganathan's Fifth Law of Library Science, has simplified and enhanced the search process, saving readers' time. While PLs, despite government funding, have been slow to adopt new technologies like integrated library automation systems (ILMS), a recent trend toward ICT use has rendered library operations more practical, resulting in improved services for customers.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper explains how PLs bolster neighborhood information services and the societal impacts derived from accessing public library materials. Rooted in the concept of learning and knowledge-sharing through libraries, the paper presents various significant factors and characteristics of PLs, which play a crucial role in providing readers with knowledge and information on pertinent issues of interest through community information services. The paper draws on Jaeger's (2011b) discussions on function and importance of PLs.

Recognized as repositories of information, PLs are formidable institutions for empowering individuals. To have a more significant impact on the growth of social and human capital, PLs, as advocated by Ghosh (2005), should extend beyond serving as repositories for light reading and actively educate people on current issues. The evolving landscape of information-seeking and learning methods, influenced by the spread of digital technology, necessitates PLs to adapt, supporting local literacy initiatives and fostering intellectual and social empowerment. PLs are envisioned to contribute to women's education and bridge the digital gap by providing internet access to impoverished and underdeveloped areas.

Several PLs have initiated efforts to embrace the digital revolution, aiming to create knowledge settings where people can seek and access information in both printed and digital formats. Reviving PLs and positioning them in the service of the information economy presents a complex challenge. There is a growing realization of the need to reinvest in PLs to meet expanding information requirements and promote reading among the general population (Pyati, 2009). PLs are actively participating in various projects to support community literacy drives. Simultaneously, they are focal points for efforts to function as Community Information Centres (CICs), fostering reading habits and supporting the community's knowledge infrastructure.

## FINDINGS

While characterizing PLs as learning systems, this paper outlines key elements supporting the development of reading habits and intellectual sophistication within PLs. Amidst the ongoing digital era, the reevaluation affirms the continued importance of PLs as repositories of knowledge and information, vital for user benefits and the relevance of their diverse content.

## **Objectives Served by PLs**

PLs play a significant role in education, learning, and community development, fostering a community of learners. Offering free and accessible information services through their stock of books, periodicals, and journals, PLs serve as exceptional resources for local literature, research materials, and ancient indigenous texts. They also function as learning institutions for non-formal education, emphasizing the importance of unrestricted access to library resources.

### ***Information Literacy***

PLs have proven to be effective promoters of community information literacy, providing a platform to explore indigenous literature, culture, and philosophy. As foundational sources of knowledge, public and academic libraries contribute to the initiation of education. Particularly in distant and underdeveloped areas with low digital literacy, PLs serve as vital resources for reading materials and internet access.

### ***Centres of Community Information***

PLs continue to hold significance in providing access to information, especially as repositories for native reading material and critical local, historical, indigenous, and temporal data. Their role extends beyond traditional research resources, contributing to the cultural and social fabric of society. Recent studies indicate a resurgence in PLs' popularity, driven by an increased overall need for information due to economic and social progress.

### ***Developing a Habit of Reading and Associated Abilities***

PLs emerge as essential institutions for fostering a strong reading habit and associated abilities. They play a pivotal role in education and learning, offering services such as reading groups, assistance for

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various age groups, and engaging exhibits to encourage reading. The availability of reading materials transforms individuals, fostering the universal right to culture and education. PLs contribute to the development of intelligent, knowledgeable, and capable individuals who actively contribute to societal progress.

PLs are instrumental in shaping individual and communal development by serving as vital hubs for information access, promoting literacy, and providing tools for self-directed learning. Their continued relevance in the digital age underscores their essential role in fostering knowledge, education, and cultural enrichment across diverse communities.

### *Ensuring That Information is Available to Everyone*

In this extension of services, PLs play a vital role in catering to various demographics, including neo-literates, children, and teenagers, by encouraging them to delve into the great works of global literature. Recognizing potential challenges with original texts, PLs offer "Easy Reading" materials—simplified versions designed for easier comprehension through straightforward language, content, illustrations, and layout. Beyond facilitating simple reading, PLs assist new users, illiterates, or groups in navigating digital learning platforms, fostering equal access to education and knowledge. This endeavor aligns with the belief that knowledge empowers individuals, regardless of their background, contributing to social awareness and boosting the self-confidence of vulnerable social groups.

### *Accessibility for Those with Disabilities*

PLs address the needs of individuals with disabilities, defined as physical, mental, cognitive, or developmental challenges hindering daily life. Beyond governmental support, libraries take steps to implement initiatives catering to specific groups. Services may

include providing reading materials and audio resources for the blind, hosting social gatherings to encourage integration, and offering off-site borrowing services. PLs empower individuals with disabilities, serving as transformative tools to lessen the impact of impairments and social barriers, fostering individual and group creative and cultural capacities.

### ***Complementing Those with Diverse Cultural Backgrounds***

Cultural diversity, while a notable prospect, presents challenges in today's society. PLs play a crucial role in bridging cultural gaps by compiling reading materials in various languages, creating forums for creativity and culture, and showcasing local customs. These initiatives facilitate cross-cultural understanding, promoting equitable access to information and fostering harmonious cohabitation in multicultural societies.

### ***Enhancing Work Conditions for Social Inclusion***

PLs contribute to social inclusion by positively impacting regional labor economies. They provide support for job seekers, offering programs on personality development and job-related skills. Serving as meeting places for job seekers and entrepreneurs, PLs enhance employability and personal skills, instilling confidence in jobless individuals and empowering them to make productive use of their leisure time.

### ***A Knowledge of Information***

PLs, founded to empower individuals socially and intellectually, are crucial knowledge organizations contributing to societal advancement. Despite the dominance of the IT revolution, PLs remain remarkable repositories of knowledge and information, offering settings for coworking and reducing social obstacles to learning. They play a crucial role in promoting information literacy as a fundamental human right, supporting lifelong learning, digital

learning, tailored information services, and online tutorials. PLs contribute to personal development and inclusive participation in the economic and social life of society, enhancing the capacity of different generations to adapt to the evolving knowledge society.

## CONCLUSION

This paper underscores the vital role of PLs as indispensable institutions crucial to the continuous progress of civilization, especially in the context of digital settings. It illustrates how PLs contribute to the dissemination of information, support learning, and impact user education and community literacy initiatives. By disseminating knowledge, facilitating information access, and minimizing barriers to learning, PLs have the potential to benefit communities and encourage diverse individuals to engage in reading.

The discussion above underscores that PLs can significantly contribute to enhancing social inclusion within society. These libraries, as envisioned by the LIC working group, serve as safe, secure, and welcoming spaces that promote equality, foster support, and provide non-judgmental environments for individuals and ideas. Train (2000) identifies key characteristics of an inclusive society at both individual and communal levels, emphasizing qualities such as self-assurance, resourcefulness, positivity, responsibility, diversity, and equal access to opportunities.

The preceding section has demonstrated how PLs fulfill all these criteria, actively promoting social participation and inclusivity in society. To capitalize on the proven impacts of PLs, we advocate for governments in developing countries to embrace the principles outlined in the IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto 2022. Specifically, this entails the adoption of specific and updated legislation aligned with international treaties, financial support from national and local governments, and the incorporation of PLs as

essential components in long-term strategies for culture, information provision, literacies, and education (IFLA-UNESCO, 2022, p.3).

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