

Review of Public Library Engagement and Changing Information Needs of Communities

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Abstract: *Public libraries have traditionally served as important community institutions for providing access to books, newspapers, reference materials, educational resources, and information services. However, the rapid development of digital technologies, changing patterns of information seeking, increasing internet use, and the growing diversity of community needs have transformed the role of public libraries. Contemporary communities require information that is accessible, timely, reliable, affordable, and available through multiple formats and platforms. Consequently, public library engagement can no longer be understood only in terms of physical visits or book borrowing; it also includes digital resource use, participation in educational programmes, online information services, community activities, technology access, and interaction with librarians.*

Keywords: Public Libraries, Library Engagement, Digital Literacy, Community Participation, Library Services, Information Behaviour

I. INTRODUCTION

Public libraries are important social and educational institutions that support lifelong learning, information access, cultural participation, and community development. Historically, their principal function was to provide printed books and other physical documents to community members. Changes in communication technologies and the expansion of digital information environments have significantly altered this traditional role. Communities now obtain information through search engines, social media, online databases, mobile applications, government portals, educational platforms, and other digital sources. As a result, public libraries are required to respond to information needs that are more diverse, immediate, technology-oriented, and individually specific than those associated with traditional library use.

Public library engagement refers to the ways in which individuals and communities interact with library resources, services, staff, programmes, technologies, and physical or virtual spaces. Physical visits remain relevant, but engagement increasingly includes the use of online catalogues, electronic resources, digital lending platforms, internet facilities, virtual reference services, community programmes, information-literacy activities, and social and cultural events. The changing nature of engagement has made it necessary for libraries to understand not only who uses library services but also why people use them, what information they seek, which sources they prefer, and what prevents them from using available resources.

Information needs vary according to age, education, occupation, socioeconomic circumstances, technological skills, geographical location, and personal interests. Students may require educational and examination-related information, job seekers may need employment and career information, older adults may seek health and government-service information, while entrepreneurs may require business and market information. Communities may also require reliable information concerning public services, local history, agriculture, welfare schemes, digital services, and cultural activities. Therefore, public libraries need to move from a generalised service approach towards a more community-responsive model.

CHANGING NATURE OF COMMUNITY INFORMATION NEEDS

The information environment has become increasingly complex because of the enormous volume of information available through digital platforms. Although online access provides convenience, it also creates challenges related to information quality, credibility, misinformation, privacy, and information overload. Community members may have access to large quantities of information but may lack the skills required to identify trustworthy and relevant sources. Public libraries can address this problem by supporting information literacy and helping users evaluate, locate, interpret, and ethically use information.

The needs of communities have also become more service-oriented. Users increasingly expect information to be available quickly and conveniently rather than requiring repeated physical visits to a library. Mobile-friendly catalogues, online databases, electronic books, digital reference services, remote access, and online learning resources can therefore strengthen engagement. At the same time, physical libraries continue to provide important social and educational spaces, particularly for people who lack reliable internet connectivity, appropriate devices, quiet study environments, or affordable access to information.

PUBLIC LIBRARY ENGAGEMENT IN THE DIGITAL ERA

Digital transformation has expanded the concept of library engagement. A person can now interact with a public library without physically entering the library building. Searching an online catalogue, downloading an electronic resource, participating in a virtual programme, accessing a digital database, or seeking assistance through an online platform can all constitute forms of library engagement. This transformation provides opportunities to reach users who are geographically distant or unable to visit libraries during regular hours.

However, technological adoption alone does not guarantee greater engagement. Libraries need to understand the actual preferences and capabilities of their communities. Digital services must be supported by appropriate infrastructure, user-friendly interfaces, reliable connectivity, technical assistance, and digital-literacy programmes. Libraries also need to maintain physical services because digital inequality continues to affect sections of society. A balanced approach combining physical and digital services can therefore address diverse information needs.

INFORMATION-SEEKING BEHAVIOUR OF LIBRARY USERS

Information-seeking behaviour describes the ways individuals recognise information needs, search for information, select sources, evaluate information, and use the information obtained. Contemporary users often begin their searches through general internet search engines because these services are fast and convenient. Social media platforms and online communities have also become important sources of information. Nevertheless, convenience does not necessarily indicate reliability. Users may encounter inaccurate, outdated, biased, or misleading information.

Public libraries can contribute by developing users' ability to locate and evaluate reliable information. Librarians can act as information guides who assist users in identifying appropriate resources and developing effective search strategies. Reference services, information-literacy workshops, digital-skills programmes, research assistance, and curated information resources can strengthen the library's role within contemporary information environments.

BARRIERS TO PUBLIC LIBRARY ENGAGEMENT

Several factors may prevent community members from using public library services. Limited awareness of available resources is an important barrier. Some people may perceive public libraries mainly as places for borrowing books and may therefore remain unaware of digital databases, internet facilities, educational programmes, career services, community events, and other resources.

Other barriers include distance from the library, inconvenient opening hours, inadequate infrastructure, limited collections, lack of digital devices, insufficient internet connectivity, language barriers, disability-related accessibility problems, and limited digital literacy. Social and psychological factors may also influence engagement. Individuals who feel that library services are not designed for their needs may be less likely to participate. Consequently, libraries

need to identify barriers through regular community surveys, user feedback, consultations, and analysis of service-use patterns.

INCLUSIVE AND COMMUNITY-CENTRED LIBRARY SERVICES

Modern public libraries increasingly need to function as inclusive community spaces. Services should consider the needs of children, students, older adults, unemployed individuals, persons with disabilities, economically disadvantaged groups, and other community segments. Multilingual resources, accessible facilities, digital assistance, educational programmes, employment information, cultural activities, and community outreach can make libraries more responsive. Community participation is particularly important because librarians and administrators may not always accurately understand changing local information needs. Involving community members in programme planning and service evaluation can help libraries identify unmet needs and develop relevant services. Partnerships with educational institutions, community organisations, government agencies, and local groups can further expand the social impact of public libraries.

REVIEW OF MAJOR THEMES IN THE LITERATURE

S. No.	Major Theme	Key Focus of the Literature	Implication for Public Libraries
1	Traditional Library Use	Book borrowing, reading, reference and physical visits	Maintain quality print collections while expanding services
2	Digital Transformation	E-books, databases, online catalogues and virtual services	Develop accessible digital infrastructure
3	Information-Seeking Behaviour	Search patterns, preferred sources and information-use practices	Design services according to actual user behaviour
4	Digital Literacy	Ability to access, evaluate and use digital information	Provide digital-skills training
5	Information Literacy	Evaluation of reliability, relevance and credibility	Strengthen user education and reference support
6	Educational Needs	Academic, examination and lifelong-learning information	Provide learning resources and study support
7	Employment Needs	Career, recruitment, vocational and skill-development information	Establish career and employment information services
8	Community Information	Local government, welfare, social and cultural information	Develop community-oriented information services
9	Social Inclusion	Access for disadvantaged and marginalised groups	Introduce inclusive and accessible services
10	Technology Access	Internet, computers, mobile access and digital resources	Reduce digital-access inequalities
11	User Awareness	Knowledge of available library resources and programmes	Improve outreach and promotional activities
12	Library as Community Space	Meetings, cultural activities, learning and social interaction	Develop flexible multifunctional spaces
13	Barriers to Engagement	Distance, timing, infrastructure, awareness and skills	Identify and systematically reduce barriers
14	User Participation	Feedback, consultation and	Include users in service planning

		community involvement	
15	Future Library Services	Hybrid, personalised and technology-supported services	Combine physical, digital and community services

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHANGING INFORMATION NEEDS AND LIBRARY ENGAGEMENT

The literature suggests that changing information needs and library engagement are closely connected. When library services correspond with users' actual needs, opportunities for meaningful engagement increase. Conversely, services that remain limited to traditional collections may not fully address contemporary information requirements. The development of digital services has created new opportunities for engagement, but libraries must ensure that these services are accessible to users with different levels of technological competence.

Personalisation is another emerging consideration. Communities are not homogeneous, and different user groups require different types of information. Libraries can use user feedback and service-use data to identify patterns and develop targeted programmes. For example, students may benefit from examination resources and study spaces, while older adults may require digital assistance and information about public services. Such differentiation can make library services more relevant and encourage continued engagement.

ROLE OF LIBRARIANS IN MEETING EMERGING INFORMATION NEEDS

The changing information environment has expanded the responsibilities of librarians. Librarians are increasingly required to possess competencies in digital technologies, information evaluation, online searching, communication, community outreach, and user education. Their role is shifting from being primarily custodians of physical collections towards becoming information facilitators, educators, technology guides, and community partners.

Effective librarianship therefore requires continuous professional development. Staff should be able to assist users with digital resources, evaluate information sources, provide basic technology support, conduct information-literacy programmes, and communicate effectively with diverse groups. Strong librarian-user relationships can also contribute to greater trust in library services.

Although considerable attention has been given to library use, digital transformation, and information-seeking behaviour, there remains a need for integrated studies that examine these issues simultaneously from the community perspective. In particular, understanding the differences between users and non-users can help identify why some community members engage with libraries while others do not. There is also a need to examine how demographic characteristics, digital literacy, information preferences, awareness of services, and perceived barriers influence engagement. Further research should also consider both physical and digital forms of engagement rather than treating library use solely as physical visits or circulation statistics.

Public libraries should regularly assess community information needs through surveys, interviews, focus groups, user-feedback systems, and community consultations. Digital services should be expanded alongside traditional resources so that users can access information through multiple channels. Libraries should provide digital and information-literacy programmes to help community members search for, evaluate, and use information effectively. Outreach activities should be strengthened to increase awareness among non-users. Libraries should also provide inclusive facilities for children, older adults, persons with disabilities, economically disadvantaged groups, and users with different language requirements. Flexible opening hours, mobile-friendly services, community programmes, career information, educational support, and partnerships with local organisations can further improve engagement.

II. CONCLUSION

Public libraries are undergoing a significant transformation in response to changing information needs, digital technologies, and evolving patterns of community engagement. The contemporary public library is no longer limited to the provision of printed books; it increasingly functions as a digital access point, learning centre, information-support institution, cultural space, and community hub. Users require reliable educational, professional, social, governmental,

technological, and local information through both physical and digital channels. The literature indicates that libraries can remain relevant by adopting user-centred services, strengthening digital infrastructure, improving information and digital literacy, reducing access barriers, and involving communities in service development.

At the same time, the continued importance of physical library spaces demonstrates that digital transformation should complement rather than completely replace traditional services. A balanced model that combines technology, professional librarian support, inclusive physical spaces, community participation, and reliable information resources can enable public libraries to respond effectively to the changing information environment. Future research should focus on understanding differences among user groups, identifying the causes of non-use, evaluating digital engagement, and developing evidence-based strategies for strengthening long-term community participation in public libraries.

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