

# Contemporary Libraries: Challenges, Transformations, and Premises for Development in the New Socio-Economic Context

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## ABSTRACT

This conference paper investigates the evolving landscape of contemporary libraries amid changing socio-economic paradigms. As technological advancements, cultural shifts, and economic fluctuations redefine societal interactions with information, libraries are compelled to adapt and reimagine their roles. This study explores the challenges modern libraries face, the transformative strategies they employ, and the foundational premises for their development in this dynamic socio-economic environment. Key challenges include adapting to technological innovations, meeting shifting community needs, and managing economic constraints. The paper highlights transformative initiatives that help libraries remain relevant and impactful, emphasizing the critical premises for their development in navigating today's complexities. By analyzing case studies and synthesizing existing literature, the paper provides insights into the dynamic role of libraries in fostering knowledge dissemination, education, and community engagement. Traditionally, libraries have served as repositories of knowledge, cultural hubs, and community spaces. However, they now face numerous challenges while undergoing transformative changes to maintain their relevance and effectiveness. This paper examines these challenges, transformative efforts, and the development premises underpinning libraries in the contemporary socio-economic context.

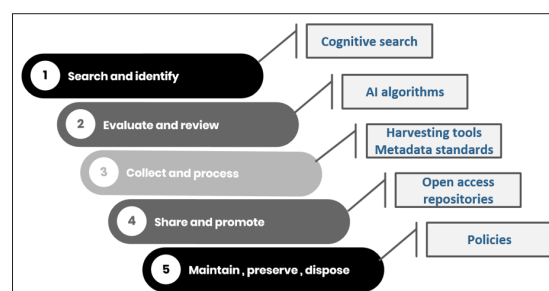
**Keywords:** Contemporary Libraries, Socio-Economic Paradigms, Technological Advancements, Cultural Shifts, Economic Fluctuations, Knowledge Dissemination, Community Engagement, Digital Integration, Information Literacy.

## Introduction

Libraries have served as pillars of education, knowledge creation and preservation in societies across history. However, in recent decades, advancements in technology coupled with changing economic and socio-cultural trends have significantly altered how individuals and communities interact with information. These developments have also transformed the role of the library in society. Contemporary libraries now navigate vastly different challenges compared to traditional libraries while undertaking transformations at an unprecedented pace.

At its core, the library retains its identity as an inclusive, democratic and public-centered institution providing free and equitable access to information resources. Even so, the modes of access, types of resources offered, scope of services and model of management varies vastly between libraries based on elements

like geographic location, economic factors, technological integration and changing patron needs.



**Figure 1:** Impact of Digital Transformation on the Future of Library Work

This paper broadly examines the key challenges confronted by contemporary libraries that compel them to transform to remain relevant. It also analyzes some of the major transformational initiatives undertaken. Most crucially, a key focus lies in delineating the fundamental premises and areas of opportunity

that shape the future development of libraries in the emerging socio-economic context. The three broad areas covered in this analysis are:

### Challenges Faced by Contemporary Libraries

From budget constraints to infrastructural limitations to disruptions induced by new technologies, libraries today confront multifaceted challenges that deeply impact their functioning and sustainability. While the specific nature of challenges varies, commonly observed problem areas include:

### Technological Disruptions and Changing Infrastructural Needs

The onset of automated information systems, electronic databases, web-based discovery tools and e-book readers have significantly disrupted traditional library operations focused chiefly on printed works and physical information systems. Integrating such technologies implies changing workflows, formats, resources and infrastructure on an ongoing basis. Harnessing rapidly evolving technologies in a financially feasible and sustainable manner poses a key challenge. Libraries also need to balance print and digital resources based on audience needs. Smaller libraries especially struggle with transforming infrastructure and allowing public access to new information technologies due to budget constraints.

### Budget Constraints and Financial Sustainability

Even prior to the 2008 global recession, libraries faced the issue of budget cuts and financial constraints interfering with daily operations and service delivery. In the post-recession period, financial uncertainty continues to limit technology upgrades, acquisitions, new service development and special projects across libraries. Diminishing budgets also lead to hiring freezes, job cuts and reduced operating capacity. Such financial constraints greatly hinder libraries in adapting dynamically to socio-economic shifts. Many public libraries rely predominantly on local tax-based funding sources, making them vulnerable to municipal and city budget cuts. Academic libraries depend chiefly on budgets allocated by parent institutions, also susceptible to wider economic downturns. Specialized libraries likewise face uncertainty in securing private, state-based or project centric funding year on year.

### Changing Needs and Expectations of Library Patrons

Libraries prioritize being responsive to and reflective of their patron community and audiences. However, the needs and expectations of library users now differ vastly compared to a decade ago owing rapid technology proliferation. Younger patrons extensively demand digital resources for education, entrepreneurship and leisure with limited interest in physical texts. Student communities prioritize group study facilities, makerspaces, research advising and digital applications over book lending services. Families, new immigrants and elderly patrons still rely significantly on physical information materials and favor libraries as inclusive social spaces. Catering to such contrasting sets of patron expectations poses a service-related challenge for libraries.

### Transformations Undertaken by Libraries

In response to constant and disruptive challenges, libraries across contexts undergo frequent transformations to remain updated,

helpful and forward-thinking knowledge institutions serving local communities. The most salient library transformations observable today ties in with:

### Integration of Digital Technologies and Information Systems

Contemporary libraries make substantial technology investments to offer state-of-the-art ICT infrastructure and information systems, achieve operational efficiency and stay responsive to patron needs. Libraries undergo digital transformation through:

- Launching online public access catalogs, e-book lending systems, library apps and automated check-out stations
- Subscribing to digital scholarly databases for online research
- Adopting web-scale discovery platforms for unified information search
- Facilitating access to e-readers, mobile devices, computers and high-speed internet
- Using RFID tags to enable self-check-out of material
- Deploying digitization initiatives to preserve aging manuscripts and rare texts

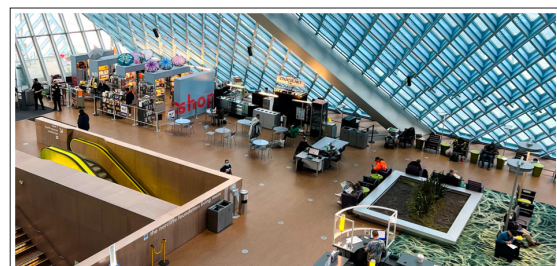
Such integration of emerging technologies expands the scope of resources and services available to patrons remotely. It also enhances access for patrons unable to physically visit libraries due to mobility, time or geographical barriers.

### Repurposing Library Spaces and Expanding Community Access

The digital transition of library materials from physical to online formats reduces the need for large-scale book stacks and storage facilities within library premises. Libraries repurpose this space to instead create:

- Collaborative zones for group learning and community events
- Dedicated children's areas with multimedia tools
- Instructional labs for information literacy and skills training
- Cafes and lounge areas that invite casual reading
- Makerspaces equipped with creative tech tools like 3D printers

Such spatial reorganization aims at turning libraries into inclusive learning spaces while retaining their cultural identity as community hubs for civic engagement. Several libraries also adopt concepts like 7-day opening across branches, mobile library services in remote areas, office hour extensions, and assistance services for home bound patrons to maximize community access.



**Figure 2:** Repurposing Library Spaces and Expanding Community Access

## Commitment to Lifelong Learning, Innovation, and Cultural Development

Alongside the operational transformation of processes and systems, contemporary libraries also embrace a philosophical shift in their outlook, tone, and institutional mission to position themselves as:

- Trusted knowledge partners focused on lifelong learning across ages
- Uplifting cultural spaces that inspire creativity, reflection, and growth
- Technology hubs geared towards digital literacy and skilled adoption of emerging innovation
- Collaborative zones that bring together cross-sector groups to deliberate local issues
- Civic centers that preserve local heritage and identity against globalized homogeneity

This shift entails developing targeted programs, events, and multimedia experiences anchored in education, creativity, and innovation to continually engage surrounding communities in developing their intellectual capabilities and cultural bases in a transformative manner.

## Premises for Development in the New Socio-Economic Context

The transformations undertaken by libraries directly shape their promise and potential as beneficial community organizations that cultivate knowledge society. However, for libraries across contexts to sustainably develop in their role as public goods within an increasingly complex, technology-driven socio-economic fabric, certain premises need to underpin their strategic decision making, partnerships and digital capabilities.

### Advocacy and Public Outreach

Though libraries retain immense public value as inclusive, safe and helpful community spaces, their identity as dynamic, contemporary hubs of learning, creativity and innovation need renewed advocacy through sustained outreach. Strategic communication campaigns that highlight library resources, events, values and services for target user groups using digitally accessed channels like social media foster awareness and engagement. Cohesive advocacy strengthens public opinion to enable financial support for libraries through government funds, private donors and community partnerships. This builds sustainability.

### Strategic Collaboration with Stakeholders

Progressive libraries seek alliances with key institutional stakeholders like schools, academic centers, government agencies, civil society groups, corporate technology firms, philanthropic foundations and media outlets through structured partnerships. Such partnerships spawn information exchanges, resource sharing, promotional avenues, volunteer participation, technical mentorship and funding options that benefit libraries and communities. Libraries also jointly develop programs with partners that align with wider socio-economic development goals like digital inclusion, sustainable community building, youth leadership and cultural integration.

### Evidence-Based Decision Making

Forward-looking libraries emphasize evidence-based decision making by continually evaluating demographic statistics, usage

metrics, service assessments and community perspectives to chart strategic goals. Such consistent evidence gathering and analysis helps libraries take definitive actions regarding collection budgets, space renovations, technology investments, program implementation and operational changes. It enables them to frame policies, initiatives and partnerships that address the most urgent community needs apart from reflecting future trends.

The above premises sustain libraries through maintaining public goodwill, optimizing partnerships and directing judicious focus to navigate ongoing socio-economic shifts.

## Comparative Case Studies

Delving briefly into select regional case studies sheds light on the common challenges confronted as well as the transformative initiatives and strategic premises that enable libraries across contexts to progress despite constraints.

### Seattle Public Library: Community-Centric Transformation

The Seattle Public Library network underwent wholesale infrastructural and philosophical transformation following a 1998 voter mandate tied to the "Libraries for All" campaign initiated to upgrade library services. Catalytic capital investment revamped existing buildings and funded a striking new Central Downtown library facility designed by architect Rem Koolhaas opened in 2004 featuring inviting public spaces and state-of-the-art amenities. Branch transformations ensured neighborhood libraries stayed embedded as community hubs while new regional branches like the 2010 Delridge Neighborhood Library brought services to poorly served zones.

The library implemented an integrated library system, launched the SPL.org online portal, digitized unique regional content into their photo and document repositories while also circulating eBook readers. Library staff roles aligned towards specialized Digital Strategy, Collections and Access divisions even while facilities, circulation and branch staff catered to ground operations. Proactive civic engagement initiatives like the neighborhood-led "Libraries for All Ages" project have the SPL partner with health agencies, schools and community centers on shared programs spanning digital inclusion drives, early literacy projects and job training workshops that uplift marginalized groups.

Despite funding declines since the 2008 recession, the SPL sustains focus owing to the shared vision of an empowered, engaged community actualized through lifelong learning. Almost 80% of city residents actively use library services demonstrating the success of its customer-centric ethos [1]. Grassroots advocacy efforts also help maintain public funding support despite strains. The SPL models progressive transformation centered on knowledge equity and public ownership.

### National Library Board Singapore: Digital Excellence and Innovation

Singapore's National Library Board (NLB) network stands distinctive for its pioneering focus on advanced technology integration within library services to promote nationwide digital literacy and building a culture of continuous innovation. Strong national budgetary support and extensive technological



capabilities drive development of the comprehensive island-wide NLB system initiated in 1995, now encompassing the National Library, Public Libraries and Archives.



**Figure 3:** National Library Board Singapore

The NLB's prolific technology integration and process automation across document workflows enabled extensive progress in digitally preserving and showcasing Singapore's documentary cultural assets through dedicated online Heritage Portals as part of its innovative Libraries and Archives Blueprint initiative (2006 - 2015). By adopting cutting-edge Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) and self-check lending technologies paired with comprehensive digital network and database building efforts across libraries, the NLB achieved immense growth in its user activity metrics over 5 years while streamlining catalog access and circulation functions with 60-80% efficiency gains.

Ongoing NLB initiatives like the Tech Outreach Bootcamp partner research agencies with public libraries to orchestrate coding and maker workshops for seniors and housewives using library lab facilities, working towards the goal of cultivating technical competencies among citizens [2]. The NLB case highlights that strategic technology leadership paired with executive level direction and resource allocation can significantly elevate libraries as pivotal national access points for digital exploration even within highly urbanized non-Western contexts.

### **Rural Libraries in Kenya: Sustained Impact Amidst Constraints**

In Kenya, rural libraries and community library blocs coordinated by the Kenya National Library Service (KNLS) network face complex challenges like electricity deficits, connectivity issues and limited budgets that severely impact ICT facilities and access to e-resources, hindering their technology integration and growth. Rural communities also demonstrate limited awareness regarding the wider educational, entrepreneurial and civic benefits of libraries [3].

Despite such constraints, strategic efforts helped expand library access and services in rural zones including the Growing Readers project launched in 2009 that promotes reading and literacy skills among early grade school children through local language

children's books, literary events and multilingual collections. KNLS partnerships with agencies like EIFL (Electronic Information for Libraries) also facilitate valuable access to free or low-cost literary resources. Library spaces also operate as key community hubs advancing alternate goals like health awareness and women's empowerment through talks, poster campaigns and counseling clinics.

While still developing, Kenya's rural libraries further social development ends amidst systemic deficits through shared advocacy, partnerships and resource optimization - pointing to the strong civic value proposition and bridging capacity inherent even among basic library units functioning in severely underserved communities worldwide. Their sustained operations despite recurring setbacks showcase that the library's role as communal change agent persists across contexts.

### **Opportunities, Future Directions and Conclusion Integrated Smart Libraries: The Future?**

As contemporary libraries advance towards technology and infrastructure homogeneity across networks through systems interoperability, data sharing and design optimizations, integrated "smart" libraries present a key evolutionary model for the future. Smart libraries feature unified physical and digital infrastructures that leverage automation, machine learning and artificial intelligence to enhance most library functions spanning circulation, cataloguing, reference services and archival document processing to build intelligent, responsive systems that dynamically serve multifarious patron needs with minimal repeated human effort [4]. Remote and virtual services then amplify using such integrated backbone functionality.

While smart library systems present a compelling vision and efficiency solution migrating select libraries towards that operational model through necessary investments in sensors, internet of things (IoT) devices, virtual services software, RFID and optimized space use bears strong transformative potential. Technology aids human effort. Select advanced libraries already reflect such integration seen in services like chatbots answering patron queries or inventory robots sorting returns. In times ahead, smart automation can significantly aid libraries facing budget cuts and downsizing serve communities reliably. However, smart library development requires cognizance that technology cannot substitute for skilled human specialists who remain pivotal in administering systems, conducting community outreach, developing cultural interpretation programs and driving strategic decision making. Managing this equilibrium is key.

### **Confronting Core Challenges through Alliance and Innovation**

Despite transformations and technology integrations, most libraries continue grappling with recurrent issues like budget deficits, infrastructure limitations and constrained professional development that hinder fulsome community service. Resolving systemic financial and resourcing barriers necessitates large scale movement building through united alliances. In the United States, groups like the American Library Association actively lobby state and federal governments highlighting that libraries merit recognition as essential social infrastructure vital for digital inclusion, upskilling, youth literacy and lifelong learning - thus warranting sustained investment [5].

Such activism counters notions that libraries bear reduced utility in the internet age and strengthens their bargaining leverage regarding public funds, policy changes and strategic collaborations. Libraries also counter fiscal uncertainties by piloting innovative community funded models like Oregon's Peer Jurisdiction Sharing program that incentivizes inter-library partnerships, resource sharing and mentor networks as mechanisms to enrich professional capabilities despite local budget deficits. Exploring alternate resourcing ideas using inter and intra sectoral networks oversees library development where systems fall short.

### Impacts of Contemporary Library Transformations Enabling Democratized Information Access

Modern ICT integration dramatically increased both onsite and remote information access opportunities by allowing contemporary libraries to offer:

- Online public access catalogs for convenient title/item lookups
- Expanded eBook collections supporting anytime, anywhere reading
- Global research databases and digitized records for 24/7 study
- Public workstations with internet connectivity for diverse searches
- Assistive technologies like screen readers/magnifiers for disabled patrons

Such provisions uphold the library's identity as an equalizing force expanding public knowledge capabilities irrespective of socio-economic hierarchies. It brings information freedom. Easy discoverability via improved search tools also upholds the right to freely explore diverse ideas - countering polarized narratives.

### Serving as Resilient Third Spaces

Contemporary libraries strongly retain their cultural role as vital third spaces for communities by adapting their physical premises into inclusive, inviting spheres that support creativity, collaboration and discourse spanning ages, viewpoints and social groups - especially significant at a time when tribal attitudes and polarized perspectives dominate many societies.

Repurposed flexible zones facilitate participative learning, makerspaces with multimedia tools inspire tinkering and ingenuity, age/group targeted library programs build literary appreciation, civic events spur discourse while cultural heritage initiatives prompt community cohesion by activating a shared past.

Such programming cements libraries as conduits supporting free and non-judgmental transfer of ideas between diverse cultures, communities and demographic spectra - enabling resilience.

### Anchor Institutions Backing Local Priorities

Localized library services intrinsically understand and cater to surrounding community priorities. Local libraries backup hyperlocal needs that receive low prominence in larger bureaucratic governance systems. Specialized programming like multi-language story times, job search clinics, small business forums and health literacy drives directly serve local ethnic groups, vulnerable populations and struggling groups often excluded from mainstream provisions.

As visible landmarks interfacing public agency with cultural ground realities, libraries nurture social trust in civic systems while backing inclusion and collective advancement - making them invaluable anchors upholding the health of surrounding habitats.

### Avenues for Digital Participation and Reduced Divides

Access to technology creates opportunity. Contemporary libraries stand at the forefront of ensuring digital inclusiveness by making immersive technologies easily available via makerspaces while actively conducting digital skills training tailored for seniors, new internet users, language minorities and economically disadvantaged groups through dedicated programs.

Assisted learning facilitates digital wellbeing and cyber participation capabilities among vulnerable citizens - upholding their agency and socio-economic parity in a dematerialized world. It counters divides exacerbated by tech capitalism. Libraries thus function as digital springboards enabling segments deprived of basic ICT access gain vital connectivity and big tech knowhow under welcoming, risk-free conditions through guided learning avenues.

**Table 1: Key Library Transformation Areas Mapped to Core Community Benefits**

Transformation Area	Community Benefits
<b>Technology Integration</b> (ICT systems, Digital databases, Automation solutions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enables convenient remote access, expanding patron reach</li> <li>• Allows access to more diverse, current info resources</li> <li>• Operational efficiencies free up staff for direct services</li> </ul>
<b>Spatial Repurposing</b> (Makerspaces, Community rooms, Collaborative zones)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invites community engagement through inclusive areas.</li> <li>• Facilitates participatory learning and creation.</li> <li>• Provides communal space for civic discourse events</li> </ul>
<b>Service Focus</b> (Lifelong learning programs, Cultural heritage initiatives)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Builds community capabilities through skill development drives</li> <li>• Reinforces local cultural identity against homogenization</li> <li>• Strengthens community bonds across groups</li> </ul>

**Table 2: Sample Framework to Compare Regional Contemporary Library Transformation Cases**

Country Context	Key Distinctive	Critical Challenges	Transformative Initiatives
Singapore	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Extensive ICT expertise and infrastructure</li> <li>Centralized national library administration</li> </ul>	Avoiding cultural dilution in hyper urbanized environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pioneer RFID self-check deployment</li> <li>Digital literacy drives using library maker labs</li> </ul>
Kenya	Developing economy constraints like electricity deficits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited rural access and infrastructure</li> <li>Low community awareness on library values</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Literary programs to spur early grade reading</li> <li>Health/community outreach using library spaces</li> </ul>
Ireland	Deep ties between regional libraries and Gaelic tradition	Reduced budgets impacting opening hours and acquisitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Library spaces hosting cultural activities and language events</li> <li>Using volunteer networks to expand program capabilities</li> </ul>

## Conclusion

This analysis outlines the key challenges compelling contemporary libraries worldwide to implement urgent transformations spanning their infrastructure, technologies, skills, spaces and institutional outlook to retain relevance. It also elucidates the strategic premises around advocacy, collaboration and evidence-directed change that enable libraries to sustainably progress in meeting emergent community needs despite grappling with recurring systemic constraints around budgets, conservative outlooks and dated public perceptions in the evolving socio-economic scenario [6-15].

Select regional case studies showcase how despite differences in economic standing and technological access, libraries universally serve as inclusive hubs uplifting community welfare - thus warranting greater recognition of their immense public value in enabling capability building. Yet realizing such valuation means embracing identity shifts. Libraries are no longer just quiet repositories of printed wisdom but dynamic spaces fostering digital exploration, cultural awakening and skill development across ages - leading ultimately to more informed, discerning societies [16-25].

Confronting limitations through balanced technological assimilation, strategic collaborations with institutional allies from government bodies to private tech firms, sustained advocacy and an unwavering public service ethos focused on uplifting marginalized groups and furthering participative knowledge growth allows libraries to power societies through epochs of political flux, economic uncertainty and technological disruption [26-31].

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