

Original Article

CHANGING ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF LIBRARIES IN THE DIGITAL ERA: A SECONDARY DATA-BASED STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Libraries have always played an important role in education, research, culture and access to information. However, the rapid growth of digital technology has changed the way libraries collect, organize, preserve and provide information. The modern library is no longer limited to printed books and physical reading spaces. It increasingly provides electronic books, online journals, databases, institutional repositories, internet facilities, remote access, digital literacy support, research assistance and technology-based services. The present study examines the changing role and continuing importance of libraries in the digital era through secondary data. The study is descriptive and analytical in nature. Data and evidence were collected from published research articles, professional reports and official sources, including the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), UNESCO, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), the National Digital Library of India (NDLI), the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, and other scholarly sources. The analysis shows that digital technology has not reduced the importance of libraries; rather, it has widened their responsibilities. Libraries now work as hybrid learning spaces, digital access centres, research-support units, information-literacy centres, cultural repositories and community knowledge hubs. Current developments in artificial intelligence are further changing reference, discovery and information-management services. At the same time, libraries face challenges related to finance, digital infrastructure, staff skills, copyright, privacy, misinformation and unequal access to technology. The study concludes that the future library will remain important when it combines reliable information, professional guidance, inclusive digital access and human-centred services.

Keywords: Libraries, Digital Libraries, Digital Era, Information Technology, Digital Literacy, Artificial Intelligence, Information Access, Library Services

INTRODUCTION

Libraries are among the oldest institutions created for the preservation and sharing of knowledge. Traditionally, their major functions included collecting books, organizing reading material, maintaining records, preserving important documents and assisting readers in locating information. Educational institutions depended heavily on libraries because textbooks alone could not provide all the information required for teaching, learning and research.

The development of computers, the internet, mobile technology, electronic publishing and cloud-based information systems has changed this traditional environment. Information that once required a physical visit to a library can now be accessed through a

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laptop or mobile phone. Electronic journals, e-books, online databases, open-access repositories, digital archives, search engines and artificial-intelligence tools have created new ways of finding information. As a result, some people have questioned whether physical libraries are still necessary.

Such a view, however, considers the library only as a storage place for books. The basic purpose of the library is much wider. It is an institution that connects users with organized, reliable and relevant knowledge. In the digital environment, this responsibility has become more complex rather than less important. Users now face an enormous volume of information of different quality and reliability. Libraries therefore have to help people not only obtain information but also evaluate, interpret and use it responsibly.

The IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto 2022 presents the public library as a local centre of information and a force for education, culture and lifelong learning. The updated manifesto recognizes remote access, digital literacy, media and information literacy, access to scientific knowledge, cultural preservation and equitable access as important library responsibilities [International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, & UNESCO. \(2022\)](#).

The IFLA Trend Report 2024 also indicates that the information environment is changing because of artificial intelligence, changing knowledge practices, questions of trust, increasingly complex information skills and unequal distribution of digital technologies [International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, & UNESCO. \(2022\)](#). These developments directly affect what libraries are expected to do. The present paper therefore examines how the role of libraries has changed in the digital era and why libraries continue to be important despite the rapid availability of information on the internet.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

[Ghosh \(2005\)](#) examined the Indian public library system and discussed the opportunities offered by information and communication technology. The study noted weaknesses in the public library system but argued that technological development could help transform libraries, particularly by improving information access in rural areas.

[Ongus and Kemparaju \(2007\)](#) discussed opportunities and challenges associated with electronic information services in Indian public libraries. They observed that public information requirements were becoming more diverse and that libraries had to respond through effective electronic information services.

[Mahesh and Mittal \(2008\)](#) reviewed 63 published studies relating to digital libraries in India. Their analysis showed that much of the early literature concentrated on digitization and digital collection development, while issues such as digital rights management, security and policy received less attention.

[Connaway et al. \(2017\)](#) prepared the Academic Library Impact report for ACRL. The report examined the contribution of academic libraries to student learning and success and emphasized the importance of demonstrating links between library activity and institutional outcomes.

[De and Heravi \(2020\)](#) examined information literacy and fake news. Their review showed that librarianship has an important role in helping people identify misinformation and develop the ability to evaluate information.

[Deja et al. \(2021\)](#) examined digital-transformation readiness and information-literacy outcomes. They found that information and digital literacy contribute to individual empowerment and institutional readiness for digital transformation.

[Simms and Paschke-Wood \(2022\)](#) studied the changing role of academic librarians in relation to student success. Their findings showed that student-success responsibilities were increasingly becoming part of academic librarians' work.

[Mukherjee and Patra \(2023\)](#) reviewed secondary information concerning approximately 50 digital-library initiatives in India. They observed that several initiatives still required stronger search interfaces, metadata organization, digitized collections and remote access.

[Muppidi and Amidu \(2026\)](#) examined three District Central Libraries in Andhra Pradesh. Their study showed that public libraries were expanding beyond book lending towards digital and community-centred services, although infrastructure and workforce constraints remained.

[Ayinde et al. \(2026\)](#) systematically reviewed 29 publications on AI adoption in academic libraries. They identified applications in reference services, technical operations, circulation, collection development, information literacy and professional development, while also noting funding and infrastructure barriers.

RESEARCH GAP

Existing literature has examined many individual aspects of library transformation, including digitization, electronic resources, user services, information literacy, student success and artificial intelligence. Earlier Indian studies focused substantially on establishing digital collections and technological infrastructure, whereas recent studies increasingly discuss remote access, digital literacy, service quality and AI-based services. However, the changing role of libraries should not be understood only as a technological change. Digital transformation affects the educational, social, research, cultural and professional functions of libraries at the same time. There is therefore a need to bring evidence from different types of libraries and authoritative secondary sources

together and examine what has actually changed, what traditional functions continue to remain important, and what new responsibilities libraries are assuming. The present study addresses this gap through an integrated analysis of research literature, international professional guidance and Indian digital-library initiatives.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- 1) To examine the changing role of libraries in the digital era.
- 2) To study the importance of libraries in education, research and information access in a technology-based environment.
- 3) To examine the development of digital and technology-enabled library services.
- 4) To analyse the role of libraries in digital literacy, information literacy and responsible use of information.
- 5) To identify the major challenges faced by libraries during digital transformation.
- 6) To suggest measures for strengthening libraries in the future digital environment.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) How has digital technology changed the traditional role of libraries?
- 2) Why do libraries remain important when large amounts of information are freely available online?
- 3) What new services and responsibilities have developed in modern libraries?
- 4) What challenges limit the effective digital transformation of libraries?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

The present study used a descriptive and analytical research design based entirely on secondary data. No primary questionnaire, interview or field survey was conducted for this paper.

NATURE OF DATA

Both quantitative and qualitative secondary information was used. Quantitative information included published figures relating to digital resources, users and reviewed studies. Qualitative evidence included published findings concerning changing services, digital literacy, artificial intelligence, information access and challenges faced by libraries.

SOURCES OF SECONDARY DATA

- International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) and UNESCO publications
- Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) and OCLC Research
- Ministry of Culture and Press Information Bureau, Government of India
- National Digital Library of India (NDLI)
- Peer-reviewed journals and scholarly databases including ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis, De Gruyter, Emerald and SAGE

SEARCH TERMS AND ANALYSIS

Literature was identified using combinations of terms such as digital libraries, changing role of libraries, libraries in digital era, academic libraries, public libraries, digital transformation, information literacy, digital literacy, artificial intelligence in libraries, digital libraries India, and electronic library services. Foundational publications were included where necessary, while greater emphasis was given to recent developments. The collected material was examined through thematic content analysis and organized around access, learning, research support, digital literacy, inclusion, preservation, community services, artificial intelligence and emerging challenges. Because the sources differed in populations and methods, no statistical meta-analysis was attempted.

SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS

Table 1

Table 1 Selected Evidence Showing the Digital Transformation of Libraries		
Source	Secondary Evidence	Implication
Mahesh and Mittal (2008)	Reviewed 63 Indian digital-library studies	Digital-library development had become an important area of Indian LIS research
ACRL (2016/2017)	Evidence from 60+ institutional projects and the Academic Library Impact programme	Library instruction and use are connected with student learning and success
National Digital Library of India. (2025)	About 125 million digital resources and around 94 million registered users	Digital libraries can provide knowledge access on a very large scale
International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. (2024)	Identifies trends involving AI, trust, changing knowledge practices, complex skills and digital inequality	Libraries must respond to a rapidly changing information environment
Mukherjee and Patra (2023)	Examined about 50 Indian digital-library initiatives	Search, metadata, standards and remote access remain areas requiring improvement
Ayinde et al. (2026)	Reviewed 29 studies on AI in academic libraries	AI is entering several library functions, but adoption barriers remain
National Mission on Libraries	Virtual library development, model libraries, surveys and capacity building	Library modernization is also a public-policy issue

The table demonstrates that digital transformation is occurring at several levels. It includes not only digitization of books but also changes in access, teaching, public policy, multilingual services, artificial intelligence and user support.

A particularly important example in India is the National Digital Library of India (NDLI). Information published by the NDLI project indicated that, as of April 2025, the platform offered approximately 125 million digital resources and had around 94 million registered users. Such scale would not be possible through a conventional building-based collection alone [National Digital Library of India. \(2025\)](#).

At the policy level, the Government of India's National Mission on Libraries includes the National Virtual Library of India, modernization of model libraries, quantitative and qualitative surveys and capacity-building programmes for library professionals. Its objectives include digital-content services and improvement of public-library infrastructure [Ministry of Culture, Government of India. \(2026\)](#).

CHANGING ROLE OF LIBRARIES IN THE DIGITAL ERA FROM STOREHOUSE OF BOOKS TO ACCESS POINT OF KNOWLEDGE

The traditional library was mainly collection-centred. Its strength was often measured through the number of books, journals and other physical documents it possessed. The modern library is increasingly access-centred. A user may access a journal article, thesis, e-book or database through the library without the item being physically stored in the building. This has changed the meaning of collection development. Libraries now manage printed collections, licensed databases, institutional repositories, open-access resources and digital archives. The objective is no longer simply to own material but to provide dependable access to useful information.

FROM PHYSICAL ACCESS TO ANYTIME AND REMOTE ACCESS

Digital resources have reduced dependence on library opening hours and geographic location. Students and researchers can use institutional repositories, electronic journals and digital libraries outside the library building. Remote access became especially important when physical access to institutions was disrupted during the COVID-19 period, and it has now become a permanent expectation. The library of the digital era therefore has two service environments: the physical library and the online library.

FROM INFORMATION PROVIDER TO INFORMATION-LITERACY EDUCATOR

In earlier periods, access to information itself was often the main challenge. Today, users can receive thousands of search results within seconds. The new problem is deciding which information is reliable, relevant, current and ethically usable. Libraries therefore

have an educational responsibility to develop information literacy. Users must know how to search effectively, evaluate sources, distinguish scholarly evidence from unsupported claims, cite material correctly and avoid plagiarism. [De Paor and Heravi \(2020\)](#) highlighted the contribution of librarians and information-literacy education to combating fake news.

FROM SUPPORTING READING TO SUPPORTING LEARNING AND STUDENT SUCCESS

Modern academic libraries are increasingly connected with the wider educational mission of their institutions. Librarians conduct orientation sessions, database training, research workshops, referencing support and information-literacy programmes. Evidence summarized by ACRL shows positive links between library use, library instruction and indicators of student learning and academic success. [Simms and Paschke-Wood \(2022\)](#) similarly found growing attention to student success within academic-library roles.

FROM REFERENCE DESK TO RESEARCH SUPPORT SERVICE

Traditional reference work involved helping readers locate encyclopaedias, dictionaries, bibliographies and books. Modern research support involves advanced database searching, literature-review strategies, citation management, research visibility, institutional repositories, open-access publishing, research-data organization, bibliometric information, plagiarism awareness, and identification of credible journals and sources. The librarian is consequently becoming a research-support professional as well as a custodian of information.

FROM PRESERVATION OF PHYSICAL MATERIAL TO DIGITAL PRESERVATION

Preservation remains one of the oldest library responsibilities, but the objects requiring preservation have changed. Important material may now exist as digital photographs, electronic theses, audio and video recordings, websites, scanned manuscripts and born-digital documents. Digitization also makes rare cultural materials available to users who cannot physically visit the institution. The IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto recognizes preservation and access to cultural heritage and scientific knowledge among important modern library functions.

FROM TECHNOLOGY USER TO DIGITAL INCLUSION CENTRE

Not every person has equal access to computers, high-speed internet, paid databases or digital skills. Public libraries can reduce this gap by providing computers, internet connections, Wi-Fi, digital resources, basic technology assistance and training. The IFLA Trend Report notes that digital technologies remain unevenly distributed. Digitalization therefore increases rather than removes the importance of institutions that provide inclusive access.

FROM MANUAL SERVICES TO ARTIFICIAL-INTELLIGENCE SUPPORTED SERVICES

Artificial intelligence represents the newest stage of technological change in libraries. Possible applications include chatbots, recommendation services, search support, automated classification, metadata work and personalized reference assistance. [Ayinde et al. \(2026\)](#) identified AI applications across reference services, circulation, technical services, collection development, information literacy and staff development. AI should therefore be viewed as a tool that supports professional work, not as a simple replacement for librarians. Libraries remain responsible for accuracy, privacy, ethics, source evaluation and equitable service.

IMPORTANCE OF LIBRARIES IN THE DIGITAL ERA RELIABLE AND ORGANIZED INFORMATION

The internet provides a huge volume of information but does not automatically organize it according to academic quality. Libraries create structured pathways to reliable information through catalogues, databases, subject guides, metadata and professional selection.

EQUAL ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE

Commercial scholarly databases and electronic publications can be expensive. Libraries make many such resources available collectively. Public and educational libraries can also support people who do not possess personal digital infrastructure.

SUPPORT FOR FORMAL EDUCATION

Libraries support classroom teaching by offering additional reading, reference material, databases and learning spaces. Their contribution is particularly important where students need resources beyond prescribed textbooks.

SUPPORT FOR RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

Researchers need reliable literature, previous research, databases, theses and scholarly communication services. Libraries reduce the time required to locate and organize this material and can improve the quality of literature searching.

DEVELOPMENT OF CRITICAL THINKING

Information literacy requires users to question the source, purpose, evidence and reliability of information. These skills contribute directly to critical thinking and are increasingly necessary in digital environments affected by misinformation and AI-generated content.

LIFELONG LEARNING

A library does not serve only formal students. Public libraries can support job seekers, children, senior citizens, independent learners and community members. The IFLA-UNESCO Manifesto places lifelong learning and equal access at the centre of the public-library mission.

CULTURAL AND INTELLECTUAL PRESERVATION

Libraries preserve records of society. In digital form, historical documents and local cultural materials can be made accessible to a much wider population while original materials are protected from repeated physical handling.

HUMAN GUIDANCE IN AN AUTOMATED ENVIRONMENT

Search engines and AI systems can retrieve or generate information rapidly, but they can also provide inaccurate, incomplete or biased results. Professional librarians provide an important human layer of judgement, context and ethical guidance.

MAJOR CHALLENGES FACED BY LIBRARIES

FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS

Digital resources, software, hardware, network infrastructure, cybersecurity and licensing all require continuing expenditure. AI adoption adds further costs. Funding was among the most frequently reported barriers in the AI-library literature reviewed by [Ayinde et al. \(2026\)](#).

DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Reliable internet, servers, computers and power supply are basic requirements for effective digital services. Infrastructure weaknesses can produce major differences between well-funded and poorly funded libraries.

NEED FOR PROFESSIONAL TRAINING

Librarians require continuous training in digital systems, online databases, metadata, research support, cybersecurity, digital preservation and emerging AI tools.

DIGITAL DIVIDE

Users differ in devices, connectivity, language, disability, economic conditions and digital skills. Digital transformation that ignores these differences may increase inequality.

COPYRIGHT AND LICENSING

Digital copying and distribution create complex questions concerning copyright, licensing, fair use and long-term preservation.

PRIVACY AND DATA SECURITY

Digital library platforms may collect information about searches, reading behaviour or user accounts. Libraries must balance personalization with confidentiality and ethical treatment of user data.

MISINFORMATION AND INFORMATION OVERLOAD

Users have access to more information than ever before, but verifying reliability has become more difficult. Libraries must therefore invest in media and information literacy.

PRESERVATION OF DIGITAL CONTENT

Digital material can become inaccessible because of changing software, file formats, broken links, hardware failure or inadequate preservation policies.

UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA

Indian digital-library initiatives have developed significantly, but research continues to report differences in infrastructure, standards, metadata, remote access and professional capacity. [Mukherjee and Patra \(2023\)](#) identified several such weaknesses across approximately 50 initiatives.

MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

- 1) Libraries are changing rather than disappearing. Their fundamental purpose of connecting people with knowledge remains stable, but methods of service delivery have changed significantly.
- 2) The modern library is hybrid in nature. Printed resources, physical spaces, electronic resources and remote services operate together.
- 3) Digital access has considerably increased the reach of libraries. NDLI demonstrates the possibility of delivering very large digital collections to millions of users.
- 4) The librarian's role has expanded. Modern librarians increasingly work as educators, digital-literacy trainers, research-support professionals, information evaluators and technology facilitators.
- 5) Information literacy has become a core library responsibility because easy access to online information makes evaluation of credibility more important.
- 6) Libraries contribute to learning and academic success through resource access, instruction and research support.
- 7) Public libraries have an important digital-inclusion role by providing internet and information services to people who may lack other reliable access.
- 8) Artificial intelligence is beginning to influence library operations, especially reference, discovery, organization and user-support services.
- 9) Digital transformation remains unequal because finance, infrastructure, digital skills and policy differences create significant gaps among institutions.
- 10) Physical libraries continue to be relevant because students and communities still require study spaces, human support, print collections and accessible community institutions.
- 11) The future of libraries depends more on adaptability than on format.

SUGGESTIONS

- 1) Libraries should adopt a hybrid service model combining physical and digital collections instead of treating them as competing systems.
- 2) Institutions should provide adequate budgets for electronic resources, internet connectivity, digital preservation and emerging technologies.
- 3) Regular professional-development programmes should be organized for librarians in digital literacy, AI literacy, metadata, database searching and research support.
- 4) Digital-library websites should provide simple search systems, well-structured metadata and effective remote access.
- 5) Libraries should conduct regular programmes on information literacy, fake news, responsible AI use, plagiarism and evaluation of online sources.
- 6) More resources should be made available in Indian and regional languages to increase inclusive access.
- 7) Public libraries should be strengthened as community digital-access centres, particularly in rural and underserved areas.
- 8) Libraries should develop clear policies relating to user privacy, cybersecurity, AI tools and responsible data use.
- 9) Digitization projects should include long-term preservation plans rather than focusing only on scanning documents.

- 10) Libraries should collaborate with teachers, researchers, IT departments, cultural institutions and community organizations.
- 11) Library performance should be assessed not only through collection size but also through user engagement, learning support, access, satisfaction and community impact.
- 12) AI should be introduced carefully with continuous human oversight and verification.

CONCLUSION

The digital era has created one of the most important transformations in the history of libraries. The change from printed collections to digital information initially created concern that libraries might lose their relevance. Secondary evidence examined in the present study suggests the opposite. Technology has expanded the range of services that libraries can provide and has created new areas in which professional information support is required.

The traditional functions of collection, organization, access, preservation and user assistance remain important, but their forms have changed. The collection can now include millions of digital objects; access can take place remotely; preservation includes born-digital material; reference services can use online communication and AI; and user education increasingly involves information, digital and AI literacy.

The digital environment has also created new problems. Information abundance has brought misinformation and information overload. Online services have created privacy and cybersecurity concerns. Digital resources have increased dependence on technology and licensing. Artificial intelligence can improve services but also creates questions of reliability, bias, ethics and professional skills.

For these reasons, libraries remain essential. Their importance no longer depends simply on how many books are placed on shelves. Their value lies in providing organized access, reliable information, inclusive services, professional guidance, learning support, cultural preservation and a trusted connection between people and knowledge. The most successful library of the future will therefore not be completely physical or completely digital. It will be a flexible, inclusive and technology-enabled knowledge institution in which digital innovation is combined with professional judgement and human-centred service.

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