The Social Role of Libraries in Reducing Information Inequality

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INFO ARTIKEL	ABSTRAK
	Information inequality remains a persistent social challenge shaped by unequal access to information resources, digital infrastructure, and information literacy. This study examines the social role of libraries in reducing information inequality by conceptualizing libraries as inclusive public institutions that mediate access to information and support social inclusion. Using a qualitative descriptive–analytical approach based on conceptual and normative analysis, the study synthesizes academic literature and policy discourses on libraries, the digital divide, and information justice. The findings indicate that libraries reduce information inequality through integrated strategies combining access provision, digital literacy programs, and community-oriented services. However, institutional constraints, policy fragmentation, and emerging ethical challenges related to digital technologies limit their effectiveness. The study concludes that libraries play a strategic role in advancing equitable access to information, provided they are supported by coherent policies and normatively grounded governance frameworks.

INTRODUCTION

Information inequality has become a defining challenge of contemporary information societies, driven by unequal access to information resources, digital infrastructure, and information literacy. While digital technologies have expanded the volume and speed of information circulation, they have not eliminated structural disparities in access and use. Instead, digitalization has reconfigured information inequality into more complex forms, where exclusion is shaped not only by connectivity, but also by socioeconomic status, education, age, disability, and institutional support (Lythreatis, El-Kassar, & Singh, 2021; Ishmuradova et al., 2024). As a result, information inequality increasingly mirrors broader patterns of social stratification and injustice, reinforcing existing power asymmetries within the knowledge economy (Hall, 2021; Tognoli, 2025).

Within this context, libraries have long been recognized as public institutions committed to equitable access to information. Historically grounded in principles of

openness and public service, libraries have evolved from collection-centered institutions into active social infrastructures that mediate access to digital technologies, knowledge resources, and learning opportunities (Leguina, Mihelj, & Downey, 2021; Dengelbayeva, 2025). In the digital era, public and academic libraries play a critical role in mitigating the digital divide by providing free access to ICT facilities, digital literacy programs, and community-oriented services for marginalized populations, including low-income groups, older adults, persons with disabilities, and digitally excluded communities (Casselden, 2023; Intahchomphoo & Vellino, 2024).

However, access alone does not guarantee information equity. Research on the digital divide demonstrates that inequality persists across multiple dimensions, including skills, usage, and the capacity to transform information into social and economic capital (Lythreatis et al., 2021; Jutras, 2023). Libraries therefore face growing expectations to move beyond technical provision toward socially embedded interventions that address structural barriers to information participation. At the same time, libraries operate within constrained institutional environments characterized by limited funding, uneven policy recognition, and the increasing commercialization of information ecosystems, which can undermine their social mission (Hall, 2021; Matsieli & Mutula, 2025).

Existing literature on libraries and information inequality has primarily focused on operational and technological responses, such as digital library development, ICT integration, and AI-based services aimed at improving access and efficiency (Bhat, 2024; Bajoria, 2025). While these studies contribute valuable insights into service innovation, they often treat libraries as neutral service providers rather than as social institutions embedded in power relations and normative struggles over access, inclusion, and justice. Consequently, the broader social role of libraries in addressing information inequality as a structural and ethical issue remains under-theorized (Igarashi, Koizumi, & Widdersheim, 2022; Tognoli, 2025).

This gap is particularly evident in the limited integration between library studies and critical perspectives on information inequality, social justice, and digital exclusion. Few studies explicitly conceptualize libraries as agents of social intervention capable of redistributing informational resources and reducing inequality through normative commitments to inclusion and equity (Leguina et al., 2021; Aliyu et al., 2025). As a result, the contribution of libraries to reducing information inequality is often discussed implicitly, without a coherent analytical framework that links library services to broader social objectives.

Responding to this gap, this study examines the social role of libraries in reducing information inequality through a qualitative conceptual and normative analysis. By situating libraries within debates on the digital divide, social inclusion, and information justice, this research seeks to reconceptualize libraries as active social institutions rather than passive service providers. The study aims to clarify how libraries contribute to mitigating information inequality and to highlight their strategic role in promoting equitable access to information in contemporary knowledge societies.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive–analytical approach with a conceptual and normative orientation to examine the social role of libraries in reducing information inequality. Qualitative research is appropriate for this study because it allows for an in-depth interpretation of social phenomena, institutional roles, and normative values embedded in library practices, rather than measuring variables quantitatively (Sugiyono, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research does not aim to test hypotheses, but to construct analytical understanding through critical engagement with concepts, theories, and policy discourses related to libraries and information inequality.

The primary data sources consist of secondary qualitative materials, including peer-reviewed academic journal articles, policy documents, institutional reports, and authoritative theoretical works on libraries, the digital divide, information inequality, and social inclusion. These sources were selected purposively based on their relevance to the research focus and their contribution to contemporary debates on information access and social justice (Leguina et al., 2021; Lythreatis et al., 2021). The data collection technique employed is systematic library research, which involves identifying, reviewing, and categorizing relevant literature to ensure conceptual depth and analytical coherence (Sugiyono, 2019).

Data analysis was conducted through conceptual and normative analysis. Conceptual analysis was used to clarify key concepts such as information inequality, digital divide, and the social role of libraries, while normative analysis was applied to evaluate the ethical and social implications of library services in promoting equitable access to information (Tognoli, 2025; Igarashi et al., 2022). The validity of the analysis was ensured through logical consistency of arguments, triangulation of scholarly perspectives, and transparency in the use of academic sources, thereby maintaining coherence between research objectives, methods, and conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Libraries as Social Institutions in Addressing Information Inequality

Information inequality should not be understood merely as a technical problem of unequal access to information technologies, but as a structural social issue rooted in disparities of power, resources, and cultural capital. Contemporary studies on the digital divide emphasize that inequality persists even when basic access is provided, due to differences in information literacy, social support, and institutional mediation (Lythreatis, El-Kassar, & Singh, 2021; Ishmuradova et al., 2024). In this context, libraries occupy a unique position as public institutions capable of intervening in these structural conditions through socially embedded information services.

Libraries function as social infrastructures that redistribute informational resources by lowering economic, technological, and cognitive barriers to access. Unlike market-based information providers, libraries operate on principles of openness, inclusivity, and public service, which align them with broader goals of social justice and democratic participation (Leguina, Mihelj, & Downey, 2021; Tognoli, 2025). Through free access to collections, digital facilities, and learning environments, libraries mitigate forms of exclusion that disproportionately affect marginalized groups, including low-income communities, older adults, and persons with disabilities (Casselden, 2023; Amelia & Prasetyawan, 2024).

Beyond access provision, libraries play a critical role in shaping users' capacities to meaningfully engage with information. Research highlights that digital inclusion depends not only on infrastructure, but also on the ability to interpret, evaluate, and apply information within social and economic contexts (Jutras, 2023; Hall, 2021). Libraries address this dimension through information literacy programs, community training initiatives, and educational support services that enhance users' agency and autonomy. These practices position libraries as active mediators between information systems and social participation rather than passive repositories of knowledge.

The social role of libraries is further evident in their capacity to respond adaptively to crises and structural disruptions. During periods of social vulnerability, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, libraries expanded their functions to include digital assistance, remote access facilitation, and targeted support for digitally excluded populations (Casselden, 2023; Intahchomphoo & Vellino, 2024). Such interventions demonstrate that libraries can operate as stabilizing institutions that counteract the intensification of information inequality during periods of systemic stress.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of libraries in reducing information inequality is not automatic. Their social impact depends on institutional capacity, policy recognition, and alignment with social inclusion objectives. Studies warn that without sustained investment and normative commitment, libraries risk being reduced to technical service providers rather than social equalizers (Hall, 2021; Dengelbayeva, 2025). This highlights the need to conceptualize libraries explicitly as social institutions whose mission includes addressing information inequality as a matter of justice rather than efficiency alone.

Library Services and Strategies for Reducing Information Inequality

Library services aimed at reducing information inequality operate across multiple dimensions, including access provision, capacity building, and social engagement. Traditional services such as lending collections and providing physical access to information resources remain essential, particularly for communities facing economic constraints (Bhat, 2024; Zarma, Usman, & Mamza, 2025). However, contemporary challenges require libraries to extend their service models toward integrated strategies that address both digital and social dimensions of inequality.

Digital library services play a significant role in narrowing access gaps by providing free internet connectivity, access to digital resources, and assistance with technology use. Studies indicate that public libraries serve as primary access points for individuals who lack reliable internet connections or digital devices at home (Aliyu et al., 2025; Bajoria, 2025). By embedding these services within trusted community institutions, libraries reduce dependency on commercial platforms and mitigate exclusion driven by market-based access models.

Equally important are educational and participatory services that enhance information and digital literacy. Libraries increasingly organize training programs, workshops, and community-based learning activities that empower users to navigate digital environments critically and independently (Jutras, 2023; Igarashi, Koizumi, & Johnston, 2023). These services contribute to long-term reductions in information

inequality by strengthening users' capacities rather than merely providing temporary access.

The diversity of library services addressing information inequality can be analytically summarized as follows:

Table 1. Library Service Strategies for Reducing Information Inequality

Service Dimension	Description	Primary Social Impact
Access Provision	Free access to print and digital resources, internet, and ICT facilities	Reduces economic and infrastructural barriers
Digital Literacy Programs	Training in digital skills, information evaluation, and online safety	Enhances user capacity and autonomy
Community Outreach	Targeted services for marginalized groups (elderly, disabled, low-income)	Promotes social inclusion
Educational Support	Workshops, tutoring, and learning facilitation	Supports lifelong learning
Cultural and Civic Programs	Public discussions, events, and knowledge-sharing activities	Strengthens democratic participation

Source: synthesized from Leguina et al. (2021); Jutras (2023); Aliyu et al. (2025).

The table illustrates that effective library interventions address information inequality through complementary service dimensions rather than isolated initiatives. Access provision alone is insufficient if not supported by educational and social engagement strategies. This integrated approach aligns with contemporary research emphasizing that information inequality is multidimensional and requires coordinated institutional responses (Lythreatis et al., 2021; Tognoli, 2025).

Despite these contributions, significant challenges remain. Resource limitations, uneven policy support, and rapid technological change can constrain libraries' ability to sustain inclusive services. Moreover, the growing influence of data-driven and AI-based systems introduces new ethical risks related to surveillance, bias, and exclusion, which libraries must navigate carefully (Matsieli & Mutula, 2025). These challenges underscore the importance of framing library services not only as technical solutions, but as normatively grounded interventions aimed at advancing information equity.

Institutional and Policy Challenges in Strengthening the Social Role of Libraries

Despite their significant potential to reduce information inequality, libraries face substantial institutional and policy challenges that limit their effectiveness as social equalizers. One of the primary challenges is the persistent under-recognition of libraries as strategic social institutions within national and local policy frameworks. In many contexts, libraries are still perceived primarily as cultural or educational support units rather than as core infrastructures for social inclusion and information justice (Hall, 2021; Dengelbayeva, 2025). This limited recognition often translates into insufficient funding, weak political commitment, and fragmented policy support.

Institutional capacity also plays a crucial role in shaping the social impact of libraries. Libraries operating in resource-constrained environments frequently struggle to maintain digital infrastructure, update collections, and develop inclusive service programs tailored

to marginalized communities. Studies show that disparities in institutional capacity contribute to uneven outcomes in digital inclusion initiatives, particularly between urban and rural libraries and between well-funded and under-resourced institutions (Zarma et al., 2025; Lomachinskiy et al., 2025). Without adequate investment in human resources and professional development, libraries may lack the expertise required to implement socially responsive and technologically adaptive services.

Another critical challenge arises from the increasing digitalization of library services, which introduces new ethical and governance concerns. The adoption of AI-driven systems, digital platforms, and data-intensive services raises questions related to privacy, surveillance, and algorithmic bias, potentially reproducing new forms of exclusion within library environments (Matsieli & Mutula, 2025; Chisita, Durodolu, & Rusero, 2025). These developments highlight the tension between innovation and equity, underscoring the need for ethical frameworks that align technological adoption with the social mission of libraries.

Policy fragmentation further complicates the role of libraries in addressing information inequality. Responsibilities for digital inclusion, education, social welfare, and cultural development are often distributed across multiple policy domains, resulting in a lack of coordination and strategic coherence. As a consequence, library-based inclusion initiatives may operate in isolation rather than as part of integrated social policies aimed at reducing inequality (Aliyu et al., 2025; Igarashi et al., 2022). Strengthening intersectoral collaboration is therefore essential to maximize the social impact of library services.

Addressing these challenges requires a shift from viewing libraries as passive service providers toward recognizing them as active agents of social intervention. This reconceptualization demands supportive policy environments, sustainable funding models, and governance structures that embed principles of social justice, inclusivity, and community participation into library development strategies (Tognoli, 2025; Leguina et al., 2021). Without such structural support, the capacity of libraries to reduce information inequality will remain uneven and vulnerable to broader socio-political constraints.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that libraries play a vital social role in reducing information inequality by functioning as inclusive public institutions that mediate access to information, digital technologies, and knowledge-building opportunities. Libraries contribute not only by providing access, but also by enhancing information and digital literacy, supporting marginalized groups, and fostering social participation. These functions position libraries as key actors in advancing information equity within increasingly digitalized societies.

However, the effectiveness of libraries in addressing information inequality is shaped by institutional capacity, ethical governance, and policy recognition. Challenges related to funding constraints, uneven digital infrastructure, and emerging risks associated with data-driven technologies underscore the need for a more robust normative and policy framework. Libraries must be supported as social infrastructures whose mission extends beyond efficiency toward social justice and democratic access to knowledge.

It is therefore recommended that policymakers explicitly integrate libraries into digital inclusion and social development strategies, while library institutions strengthen ethical guidelines and community-oriented service models. Future research should explore empirical case studies across different socio-economic contexts to further examine how libraries operationalize their social role in reducing information inequality.

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