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Reconceptualizing Library Services as Public Knowledge Spaces

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INFO ARTIKEL	ABSTRAK
  	Libraries have traditionally been conceptualized as institutions for information storage and access. However, the emergence of knowledge-based societies and digital transformation has exposed the limitations of this custodial paradigm. This study reconceptualizes library services as public knowledge spaces that facilitate interaction, participation, and collective knowledge production. Using a qualitative descriptive–analytical approach with a conceptual–critical orientation, the study examines theoretical perspectives on libraries, public space, and knowledge practices, alongside policy and institutional discourses on library development. The analysis demonstrates that libraries function not merely as information providers but as social infrastructures that enable democratic access to knowledge, epistemic diversity, and civic engagement. Reconceptualizing library services requires a paradigmatic shift from technical–administrative service models toward participatory, dialogical, and facilitative approaches to knowledge. The study further identifies governance and institutional implications, emphasizing the need for policy alignment, professional role transformation, and inclusive service design. It concludes that positioning libraries as public knowledge spaces strengthens their role in knowledge democracy and enhances their relevance within contemporary digital and social contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, libraries have been positioned primarily as institutions for the collection, preservation, and dissemination of information. This role emerged from a custodial paradigm in which libraries functioned as repositories of recorded knowledge, emphasizing access to documents, classification systems, and bibliographic control. While this model has contributed significantly to information equity, it increasingly appears insufficient in responding to the demands of contemporary knowledge societies characterized by rapid digital transformation, participatory culture, and complex information ecosystems. In such contexts, the function of libraries extends beyond

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information provision toward enabling knowledge creation, interpretation, and social learning (Sharma, 2025; Burhan et al., 2025).

The transition toward a knowledge-based society has fundamentally altered the relationship between information, knowledge, and public institutions. Knowledge is no longer understood solely as a static resource to be consumed individually, but as a dynamic, socially constructed process shaped through interaction, dialogue, and collective meaning-making. Within this framework, libraries are increasingly expected to operate as spaces that facilitate critical engagement, civic learning, and collaborative knowledge production. This expectation aligns with broader theories of the public sphere, which conceptualize public institutions as arenas for deliberation, participation, and democratic exchange (Roberts et al., 2021).

Despite these shifts, library services in many contexts remain dominated by technical–administrative paradigms centered on collections, circulation, and efficiency metrics. Service innovation is frequently equated with technological modernization, such as the adoption of digital libraries, automated systems, and electronic services. While these developments enhance operational capacity, they often fail to address the deeper transformation required in redefining libraries as public knowledge spaces. Digitalization, when treated merely as a technical upgrade, risks reinforcing existing service models rather than reconfiguring the social and epistemic functions of libraries (Hapsari et al., 2025).

This paradigmatic limitation has resulted in an underdevelopment of the social, deliberative, and participatory dimensions of library services. Libraries are rarely conceptualized as spaces that actively support dialogue, co-creation, and community-based knowledge practices. As a consequence, their potential contribution to the democratization of knowledge, civic empowerment, and inclusive public discourse remains underutilized. This gap becomes increasingly problematic in an era marked by misinformation, data capitalism, and widening inequalities in knowledge access and participation (Chisita et al., 2025).

Existing scholarship on library services has predominantly focused on operational innovation, digital infrastructure, and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, cloud computing, and blockchain applications. While these studies provide valuable insights into service optimization and technological adaptation, they often lack a critical conceptual engagement with the role of libraries as public institutions embedded within broader social and political processes. There remains a scarcity of theoretical work that explicitly reconstructs library services as public knowledge spaces and situates them within debates on knowledge democracy and participation (Gotora et al., 2025; Mishra, 2025).

This study addresses this gap by proposing a conceptual reconceptualization of library services through the lens of public knowledge spaces. It argues that libraries should be understood not merely as service providers or technological platforms, but as institutional infrastructures that mediate access, interaction, and collective knowledge production within the public sphere. Such a reconceptualization foregrounds the

normative dimensions of library services, including inclusivity, participation, and reflexivity, as core principles rather than supplementary functions.

Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: how can library services be reconceptualized as public knowledge spaces; what are the defining characteristics of library services within this framework; and what implications does this reconceptualization entail for library governance and service practices. The objective of this research is to develop a coherent conceptual framework that repositions library services as facilitators of public knowledge, while critically examining the institutional transformations required to realize this role. By doing so, the study contributes theoretically to the paradigm of library service development and offers a conceptual foundation for participatory and reflective library practices.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive–analytical research design with a conceptual–critical approach. The research does not aim to measure empirical outcomes but to interpret, reconstruct, and critically assess the conceptual foundations of library services in relation to public knowledge spaces. Such an approach is appropriate for examining normative assumptions, theoretical frameworks, and institutional paradigms within library and information science (Sugiyono, 2019).

Data sources consist of academic literature on library services, public space theory, knowledge production, and digital transformation, as well as policy documents and guidelines related to library development. The study relies on systematic library research to identify classical and contemporary theoretical contributions from library science, information studies, and social theory that are relevant to the reconceptualization of libraries as public knowledge spaces.

Data analysis is conducted through conceptual analysis to clarify key notions such as public space, knowledge, and participation, combined with critical analysis of conventional library service paradigms. An analytical synthesis is then employed to formulate a coherent conceptual model of library services oriented toward public knowledge spaces. The validity of the analysis is ensured through logical coherence among concepts, consistency of theoretical arguments, and traceability of academic sources

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Libraries as Public Knowledge Spaces: Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations

Conceptualizing libraries as public knowledge spaces requires moving beyond their traditional role as neutral information repositories toward recognizing their function as social infrastructures for knowledge production. In the framework of the public sphere, libraries operate as inclusive arenas where access to knowledge is not only guaranteed but actively mediated through interaction, dialogue, and collective learning. This positioning aligns libraries with democratic ideals, particularly the principles of openness, deliberation, and equal participation in knowledge processes (Roberts et al., 2021).

As public knowledge spaces, libraries contribute to the democratization of knowledge by reducing structural barriers to participation. They provide institutional

settings where diverse forms of knowledge, including local, experiential, and indigenous knowledge, can coexist with formal and academic knowledge systems. This pluralistic orientation challenges the notion of libraries as passive distributors of authoritative information and instead frames them as facilitators of epistemic diversity and critical engagement (Agbese, 2025).

Moreover, the relationship between libraries, knowledge, and democracy is increasingly significant in the digital era. In environments characterized by data capitalism, misinformation, and algorithmic governance, libraries function as countervailing institutions that support critical literacy, ethical information use, and public reasoning. Their role as public knowledge spaces thus extends beyond service delivery to encompass normative responsibilities related to knowledge justice and civic empowerment (Chisita et al., 2025).

From Information Provision to Knowledge Facilitation: Transforming Library Services

Reconceptualizing library services as public knowledge spaces necessitates a fundamental shift from information provision toward knowledge facilitation. Traditional service models emphasize access, circulation, and efficiency, whereas knowledge-oriented services prioritize interaction, participation, and meaning-making. This shift redefines library services as processes that enable dialogue, collaboration, and social learning rather than as transactional exchanges between users and collections (Sharma, 2025).

Within this framework, librarians assume the role of knowledge facilitators and mediators rather than custodians of information. Their professional function expands to include guiding critical inquiry, supporting participatory learning, and fostering collaborative knowledge creation within communities. Services such as community forums, participatory literacy programs, and co-creation initiatives exemplify this transformation by positioning users as active contributors to knowledge ecosystems (Mishra, 2025).

Digital technologies further reinforce this shift when integrated strategically rather than instrumentally. Platforms for digital collaboration, open knowledge repositories, and participatory archiving can strengthen the role of libraries as public knowledge spaces, provided they are designed to support inclusion and dialogue. However, without a clear conceptual orientation, digital services risk reproducing passive consumption models rather than enabling genuine knowledge participation (Hapsari et al., 2025).

Table 1. Paradigmatic Shift in Library Services

Dimension	Conventional Library Services	Library Services as Public Knowledge Spaces
Core Orientation	Information access and distribution	Knowledge facilitation and co-creation
Role of Users	Information consumers	Active participants and knowledge contributors

Role of Librarians	Information managers	Knowledge mediators and facilitators
Service Focus	Collections and efficiency	Dialogue, participation, and learning
Digital Integration	Technical enhancement	Enabler of collaborative knowledge practices

The table illustrates that the transformation of library services involves a paradigmatic reorientation rather than incremental service innovation. By embedding participation, facilitation, and reflexivity into service design, libraries can function as dynamic public knowledge spaces that respond to contemporary social and epistemic challenges (Gotora et al., 2025).

Governance and Institutional Implications of Reconceptualizing Library Services

Reconceptualizing library services as public knowledge spaces has significant implications for institutional governance and service management. Governance frameworks that prioritize efficiency, output metrics, and collection size are insufficient to capture the social and epistemic value generated by participatory and dialogical services. Libraries adopting a public knowledge space orientation require governance models that emphasize inclusivity, community engagement, and reflexive evaluation, enabling services to respond dynamically to evolving knowledge practices and social needs (Sharma, 2025).

Institutionally, this reconceptualization demands a transformation in organizational culture and professional roles. Librarians must be supported not only as technical specialists but as facilitators of knowledge exchange and community learning. This shift necessitates capacity building in areas such as critical information literacy, participatory program design, and ethical data stewardship. Without institutional investment in human resources and professional development, the conceptual transformation of library services risks remaining rhetorical rather than operational (Mishra, 2025).

Policy alignment also constitutes a central challenge. Library services as public knowledge spaces require recognition within cultural, educational, and digital governance frameworks. Fragmented policy environments that treat libraries solely as administrative units or technological infrastructures limit their capacity to function as democratic knowledge institutions. Integrating libraries into broader public policy agendas related to knowledge democracy, digital inclusion, and civic participation is therefore essential to sustaining this reconceptualization (Roberts et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

This study argues that reconceptualizing library services as public knowledge spaces represents both a conceptual necessity and an institutional imperative in contemporary knowledge societies. Libraries cannot be reduced to information providers or technologically enhanced service units, as such perspectives overlook their social, deliberative, and democratic functions. By positioning libraries as public knowledge

spaces, this research highlights their role in facilitating collective knowledge production, critical engagement, and inclusive participation.

The analysis demonstrates that transforming library services requires a paradigmatic shift rather than incremental technical modernization. This shift encompasses service orientation, professional roles, governance structures, and policy recognition. Without integrating participatory values and knowledge facilitation into institutional design, digital innovation alone is insufficient to address the epistemic and social challenges facing libraries.

Ultimately, the sustainability of libraries as public institutions depends on their capacity to function as spaces of knowledge democracy. Recognizing libraries as public knowledge spaces provides a normative and strategic foundation for developing services that are reflective, participatory, and socially responsive, thereby reinforcing the relevance of libraries in an increasingly complex and digitalized information environment.

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