



Information Access and Democracy: The Role of Libraries in Promoting Political and Legal Awareness

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ABSTRACT

This has become a prime concern in terms of information access in modern-day democratic societies as now the right and the practicality of information access play important roles in well-informed citizenry. This research paper presents the importance of libraries in facilitating political awareness as well as in enhancing the democratic activity through their activities, programming and institutional called a library. Libraries, especially the public or community libraries play a pivotal role in promoting political awareness and democratic activity. The paper uses the participatory and deliberative democracy theories to locate libraries within the environment of the information society where the provision of correct and up-to-date information is the key to shaping meaningful and democratic public discourse. The article reviews the tradition of libraries involvement in civil rights and transitions to democratic political regimes and explores current roles supporting civic literacy, battling disinformation, and technology, and digital inclusion. Issues, including political blockades, budget problems, and rural-urban digital divide are critically examined. The paper gives policy recommendations toward making libraries democratic places using case studies in different parts of the world and India. This paper highlights on the necessity of libraries as stores and conduits of civic knowledge by shedding light into the way libraries serve as repositories of civic knowledge and how they play out as mediums of its



transfer.

Introduction

In any democratic society, the movement of information is the basic pillar of public accountability, participation and transparency. The right to information is argued to be a fundamental right which is contained in other declarations of international law including, but not limited to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the IFLA Statement on Libraries and Intellectual Freedom. Knowledge institutions at the forefront of equity such as libraries are important facilitators of this right. More specifically, public libraries are both repositories of information and civic institutions where the education, information and empowerment of citizens occur.

In the strongest understanding of democracy, an informed citizenry is needed to participate in political decision, deliberations and action. Information access means that individuals are free to request, get and utilize information without any restrictions especially the information relating to governing them, laws, rights and civic responsibilities. Awareness of politics means knowledge of political institutions, rights and duties, elections and events that happen regarding politics which are the key elements to be a proper participant in the democratic race.

The problem of libraries is becoming more complex and urgent in the conditions of the 21st century information society when digital technologies and mass media have taken the leading positions in the field of spread of knowledge. Democracy is at risk because of misinformation, algorithmic biases and digital divides. This is against this background that libraries offer unbiased, reliable places of discourse, lifelong to the community and availability of verified information.

This paper seeks to investigate the following questions:

- The main questions that this paper would like to examine are the following: What historical contribution have libraries had in assisting in the growth of democratic values and political consciousness?
- Which theoretical approaches can be used to explain libraries as democratic institutions? What are the existing practices, roles and issues that libraries have to face towards encouraging political participation?
- What are some of the policies and practices that may enhance the role of libraries in maintaining democratic participation further?



In the following paragraphs, the theoretical underpinnings will be described, historical and international precedents will be discussed, modern issues will be reviewed, and the conclusions will be drawn regarding recommendations based on evidence that can be used by policy and practice.

2. Theoretical Framework

In order to discover how libraries can be used to raise political awareness and keep sustain a democratic process, it is necessary to put the discussion in the context of corresponding theoretical frameworks. In this paper, three important lenses are used including theory of democracy, theory of information society and concept of a public sphere.

2.1 Theories of Democracy

The democratic approach, in a broad sense, is a form of government, which is based on the conscious agreement and action of the citizens. Two broad categories of democratic theory, namely, participatory democracy and deliberative democracy are of particular relevance to the role of libraries.

- Participatory Democracy lays stresses on direct participation of citizens in political actions. To theorists like Carole Pateman (1970), the model works in an informed, linguistically capable and active citizens. Libraries play a role in participatory democracy by providing access to legal documents, civic learning material and avenues of community discussion and political action.
- Deliberative Democracy or how Juergen Habermas theorizes it (1984) gives more preference on the rational reflection and discourse on how to consider the formation of the alternating opinion and the policy making. As non-commercial and non-exclusive spaces, the public libraries create deliberation opportunities, as they encourage the use of public hall, discussion groups, and access to a variety of worldviews, and reflect the notion that decisions can be made through knowledge.

2.2 Information Society Theory

The growing information society has completely changed the way information is created and disseminated in the field of politics. Those who support this view hold that the information flow is highly related to power in the information age like Manuel Castells (1996). Here, the inequality of information, along digital divides, media monopolies or censorship can fatally undermine the democratic processes.

Libraries act as an equalizer in the information society because they have made it possible that all citizens of the same country can get access to political information that is accurate, timely and relevant; irrespective of his or her social-economic backgrounds. This (and this also means not only the traditional



print-based resources, but also the digital access points, online databases, government portals and e-participation devices as well).

2.3 Libraries as Public Spheres: The Habermasian Perspective

The notion of the public sphere by Juergen Habermas is the key concept in referring to the democratic role of the library. Public sphere is a space where the individual citizens would engage and debate on the issues of the general society without interference by either the state or business entities. Libraries, particularly public libraries, embody this notion by:

- Providing **neutral spaces** for civic discourse
- Ensuring **pluralistic access to knowledge**
- Hosting **community programs** that nurture civic responsibility

With the rise of information manipulation, the media echo chambers, and growing political polarization, the position of libraries as the defender of the public space is getting more crucial. They provide the infrastructural and moral basis of in-inclusive and knowledgeable discussion.

A combination of these theoretical constructs can be used to provide a stronger basis in discussing how libraries can foster political consciousness and adhere to democratic values both during the past and in the present times. The point will be examined in the following section with reference to various world and historical contexts.

3. Historical and Global Context

Libraries have traditionally not only played a role as a bookshelf, however as transformers of society, educators and democratizers. Their contribution to the improvement of the political awareness has been changing through centuries due to the influence of cultural, political, technological changes. Our focus is on some of the historical and international cases which libraries have played a major role in enhancing freedom of expression, engagement of the people and political literacy.

3.1 Libraries and Freedom of Expression

Since its origin, libraries have been a representation of intellectual freedom- freedom of people to receive various information without intimidation. The Library Bill of Rights formalized this ideal (American Library Association, 1939) and expressions of that ideal such as IFLA Statement on Libraries and Intellectual Freedom (2022) have repeated this ideal.



The existence of libraries has always been used in dictatorship and democratic societies to reflect the willingness of a society to embrace plurality and free discussions. Libraries have opposed book bans and censorship and held on to scandalous publications, and sheltered those who were able to freely express diverse views and criticisms, thus favoring the establishments under democracy.

3.2 Global Case Studies

a) United States: Libraries and the Civil Rights Movement

In the 1950s and 60s, America libraries, particularly in the South became a battleground and vehicle of civil rights. The case of desegregation of the public libraries was heated by the law, and eventually open access to information and knowledge was roused to African American communities. Such places as the Carnegie libraries gave weakened citizens power by offering them access to legal materials, voter registration documents, and discussion of civil discourse.

b) India: Libraries During the Emergency (1975–77)

The civic education and politics have traditionally been an essential part of the public libraries in India. Nevertheless, between the 1975 Emergency period as called by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, libraries experienced high degrees of censorship and surveillance. Lots of librarians kept banned books and continued to provide people with access to vital political information despite the ban, which was done secretly. In the post-Emergency India, the libraries have once again come into focus as a key participant in election sensitisation campaign and legal literacy programmes.

c) South Africa: Libraries in the Anti-Apartheid Struggle

During apartheid, racial segregation was also created in libraries in South Africa, and this permitted reaffirmation of the oppressive social order. However, local libraries and reading circles in the underground gave political training and access to the prohibited materials. Following apartheid, libraries were part of the nation and reconciliation efforts in the country since they became centers embracing all sections of the community.

d) Nordic Countries: Libraries and Democratic Culture

The system of public libraries in such countries as Sweden, Norway, and Finland has been an inherent part of the welfare state model. They are democratic institutions popularly known to provide civic resources, election information and access to the parliamentary proceedings. They have long been said to



thrive on sustained investment by the populace, good professional education, and an entrenched culture of civic engagement.

3.3 Lessons from History

The historical role of libraries in democratic movements demonstrates:

- The **resilience** of libraries under political pressure
- Their ability to **preserve dissenting voices**
- Their importance in **educating and empowering** disenfranchised populations

This history explains and justifies the modern function of libraries in the digital availability, civic engagement, and fighting misinformation-topics that are discussed in the following section.

4. Libraries and Political Awareness Today

The traditional roles of libraries have been transformed in the 21st century to a more dynamic civic institution, which facilitates political awareness, democracy, and social integration. Technological advances should have ushered in some changes in society, which as a whole has become more complex and digitally integrated; therefore, libraries are increasingly becoming essential in facilitating civic literacy, information integrity and digital citizenship.

4.1 Public Libraries as Democratic Spaces

Currently, the role of public libraries is to provide a comfortable, welcoming, and unbiased place where people can access political thought, civic responsibility, and civic policies. They act as:

- Information centres that make government documents, electoral rolls, databases of public policies and the local governance information available
- Civic learning centers that provided lectures, workshops and voter registration drives
- Communal forums where a citizen can meet with other citizens and discuss the current events or engage in debates or town halls style get together Citizens frequently go to libraries, when they want to clear their confusion about civic rights, social schemes or about which legal procedure to go through. Their non commercial community-based character makes them such special trusted institutions at an age of institutional mistrust.

4.2 Civic Literacy and Political Education through Library Programs

Libraries are becoming especially active in civic education, especially those democratic processes which involve the youth, first-time voters, and marginalized populations. Key initiatives include:



- Electoral literacy training with Election Commissions (i.e. SVEEP in India)
- Constitution literacy as a way of training citizens on their rights and obligations
- Transparency, accountability in terms of allowing people access to parliamentary and municipal debates

Libraries conduct mock parliaments, debate groups and book blogs in various urban and rural locations that help young citizens think and talk politics.

4.3 Countering Disinformation and Fake News

Misinformation is a considerable risk to the democratic health of the digital age. Libraries are taking active steps to:

- Advocacy of media and information literacy (MIL) which involves training users on the evaluation of sources, ascertaining of facts and propaganda detection
- Browse and verify sources of facts and work with civic technology sites to present reliable sources
- Professional training of the librarians to play the role of information intermediary in aiding users to differentiate between real and manipulative information.

The IFLA and UNESCO have underlined the resiliency of libraries in combating online disinformation, particularly in times of election or emergence of public health crises.

4.4 Digital Inclusion and Access to E-Government Services

Digital Inclusion and Access to E-Government Services There is also no denying that the availability of the internet and digital skills is critical to political engagement as more services become digitalized. Libraries bridge this gap by:

- Providing the underprivileged access to free internet and digital online gadgets
- Keeping e-governance kiosks where users are led through the mode of accessing welfare schemes, raise grievances or submit an RTI (Right to Information) petition
- Training in digital literacy especially to senior citizens, in the rural areas and to women

In others such as India, the Digital India program has made libraries part of an overall policy of digital inclusion, including the role they can play in bringing governance to the people.



4.5 Promoting Marginalized Voices

The role played by libraries in maintaining political vigilance of the marginalized communities or rather the linguistic minorities, the tribes, the refugees, and the differently abled cannot also be neglected. Libraries are also making a strong contribution toward advocating and giving voice to diverse expressions within the democratic system by means of multilingual collections, specialized outreach, and inclusive program development.

5. Challenges and Barriers

Regardless of their potential effect in the democracies, libraries are subjected to numerous structural, political/financial and cultural obstacles that hinder their capabilities of promoting political consciousness and action of the society. This section critically examines these obstacles.

5.1 Censorship and Political Pressure

Censorship, which is usually politically motivated is among the major threats to the democratic role of libraries:

- There are controls over libraries in certain areas, and books touching on certain political matters are either prohibited or even disappeared.
- Librarians can also be pressured institutionally to not put up programs or displays that can be seen as politically sensitive.

The fear of reprisal imposes self-censorship and denies people access to opinions contrary to the official statement or autonomous political examination. This acts contrary to the very tenets of intellectual freedom and pluralism which libraries are expected to support.

5.2 Underfunding and Resource Constraints

In a large number of nations, and in particular those of the Global South, public libraries are chronically underfunded:

Cases of budget cut-offs cause shortages in staff and reduction in hours as well as outdated collections.

Efficient technological infrastructure is not always available, and people do not get access to digital government facilities and political content on the Internet. Existing political awareness programs are usually handled using overstretched employees who have little to no training or related policies.



Failure to adequately invest in the libraries will not allow the libraries to adequately undertake their civic roles.

5.3 The Digital Divide

Inequality of access to digital infrastructure provokes major political access differences: People living in the rural areas, slums, and tribes have not necessarily enjoyed the internet connection, so the digitalized libraries and the e-government facilities are not available.

- Scanty digital literacy does not allow them to harness the online civic space or confirm political facts or engage in online discussion boards.
- Gaps in gender, age and classes intensify digital exclusion.
- In as much as libraries do their best to bridge this gap, they are limited by the technological and financial issues.

5.4 Inequitable Access and Social Exclusion

Libraries are not always equitably accessible:

- Marginalized groups are prevented by geographic distance and the lack of transportation or hostile environments to visit.
- The lack of resources that can be applied to minority communities is narrowed down by language differences and mainstream narratives of collections.
- Accessibility issues still occur among persons with disabilities even though policy requirements stipulate inclusive structures.

In this way, libraries can also, inadvertently, support rather than challenge social hierarchies (without being designed in a particular way).

5.5 Professional Challenges and Policy Gaps

Librarians often lack formal training in:

- Civic education
- Political literacy programming
- Combating online disinformation

Additionally, in many nations:



- Legislation concerning libraries is either obsolete or non-existent to the point of not acknowledging libraries as civic entities.
- Libraries are usually not included in national development plans as one of the means of achieving democratic governance, but rather, the priority is given to education or the digital infrastructure separately.

All these policy gaps lead to incoherent action and the loss of opportunities to have systemic influence.

6. Policy Recommendations and Best Practices

There is an urgent requirement of holistic policy support, institutional innovativeness, and capacity building of professionals among libraries to facilitate them to become efficient democratic institutions. The following proposals present a playbook to governments and library authorities, international organizations as well as civil society stakeholders.

6.1 Strengthening Libraries as Democratic Institutions

- Realize libraries as infrastructure of national civic development and governance structures.
- They also should be integrated in the civic education programs and voter enlightenment campaigns by electoral boards and education boards amongst the public libraries.
- Provide an incentive to library participation in the local governance (conducting town hall meetings, or holding a public consultation).

Example: Denmark has libraries formally incorporated into the local democracy agenda, providing organized sites of the debate to all the people.

6.2 Policy Support for Freedom of Information and Digital Inclusion

- Introduce and implement Right to Information (RTI) and Freedom of Information legislations that will ensure right of access to public records by citizens, and enable the libraries to provide as an access points to such services.
- Disseminate the national digital literacy initiatives in which libraries become the locale of digital citizenship training at the community level.
- Have availability of libraries that are reachable across all areas by using available broadband.

Example: The Indian Public Library Movement (IPLM) advances digital inclusion with the help of technology hubs in district libraries.



6.3 Inclusive and Culturally Responsive Services

- Build multilingual, and racially diverse collections that reflect the voices, histories of the minority and Indigenous people.
- Ensure that libraries are physically and Internet accessible to persons with disabilities as well as through assistive technologies and staff training.
- Adjust civil programmes to the local settings, consider the regional problems politically and socially.

En example: Libraries in New Zealand work with the Maaori people to integrate the knowledge systems and foundations as well as the political empowerment.

6.4 Training and Professional Development

- Integrate civic literacy, democratic engagement and media literacy curricular modules in library science courses.
- Provide in-service training for librarians on:
 - Moderating political forums
 - Hosting civic debates
 - Combatting disinformation
- Foster inter-sectoral partnerships with non-governmental organizations, legal aid groups and election organizations.

Example: The American Library Association (ALA) offers civic engagement toolkits and training materials on library service to professionals.

6.5 Funding Models and Resource Mobilization

- Increase funding to libraries by using public-private coalitions, giving grants, and alleviating programs to communities.
- Promote the use of special cigar budgets in the system of libraries.
- Apply performance-based funding attached to results in terms of civic outcomes such as voter turnout, legal literacy rates, e-participation.



Example: In Finland, public libraries are subject to performance-based grants by the state encouraging civic programming and democracy outreach.

6.6 Evaluation and Accountability

- Introduce some monitoring structures to evaluate the democratic contribution of library services.
- Gather statistical information about user interaction with civic initiatives, legal information sites and political products.
- Introduce community feedback systems to make sure the services are in connection with needs of the community and with democratic standards.

These suggestions acknowledge that libraries are not an ancillary to democracy but the core of its existence and development. The libraries actually can make their promise as the inclusive engines of democratic participation and awareness once they are supported by the policy, practice, and people.

7. Conclusion

Libraries, as the keystones of democratic societies, have never been under such an important role, given the present time of abundance of information, political polarization, and the digital fragmentation. Libraries are central places of political awareness and active citizenship, based both on their historical role in equalizing civil liberties and access to knowledge, and their contemporary role in digital literacy, civic engagement, and freedom of expression.

This paper has shown that libraries are not stagnant repositories of information but vibrant civil organisations which are anchored on the democratic theory and civic responsibilities. Libraries stimulate deliberation, inclusion, and equality, which are the cornerstones of participatory democracy, as they serve as the place of social interaction between people that work as the public spheres. These services, collections, and programs will promote the knowledge, skills, and confidence of the citizens to have access to and participate in the governance process and combat misinformation, as well as demand their rights.

There are, however, serious obstacles to libraries, including censorship and lack of money, the digital divide and policymaker indifference. In order to overcome such challenges, integrated policy, professional education, comprehensive models of service, and sustainable funding is required as a matter of urgency. International instruments (like IFLA and UNESCO frameworks) need to be put into the context of the national legislation and local practice.



To sum up, libraries cannot be any extra furniture in a democracy; they are necessary. Libraries are not just about spending money, but they are also a way of spending money in well informed, empowered and involved citizens. To advance the concept of democracies in the 21 st century, libraries should be shielded, constructed and activated as firms

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