Community Engagements through Library Innovations and Creativity

By

Abdussamad Yusuf Haruna
FEDERAL COLLEGE OF EDUCATION (TECHNICAL) BICHI
abdussamadyusufharuna4@gmail.com

Abstract

Libraries in the 21st century are no longer passive repositories of information but dynamic community hubs that foster learning, inclusion, and social development. This position paper argues that innovative and creative library practices are essential for strengthening community engagement, particularly in developing contexts where libraries can bridge information and opportunity gaps. The paper posits that through the integration of emerging technologies, user-centered service design, and collaborative programming, libraries can reposition themselves as catalysts for community empowerment. The paper highlights key innovative approaches such as makerspaces, digital literacy programmes, mobile library services, community-driven collections, and participatory outreach initiatives. These strategies not only expand access to information but also promote lifelong learning, social cohesion, and digital inclusion among diverse population groups. Furthermore, the paper emphasizes the importance of creativity in library service delivery encouraging librarians to adopt flexible, culturally responsive, and locally relevant engagement models. From a policy and practice perspective, the paper contends that sustainable community engagement requires institutional support, continuous professional development for library staff, and strategic partnerships with schools, civil society, and local governments. It also underscores the need to embed assessment mechanisms to measure the social impact of innovative library services. The paper concludes by calling for a paradigm shift in library philosophy from collection-centered operations to community-centered innovation ecosystems. By embracing creativity and technological innovation, libraries can remain relevant and significantly contribute to inclusive knowledge societies and sustainable development goals.

Keywords: Community Engagement, Library Innovation, Creativity, User-Centered Services, Digital Inclusion.

Introduction

Libraries have historically served as custodians of knowledge, preserving and providing access to information resources that support education, research, cultural heritage, and lifelong learning. However, the rapid evolution of information and communication technologies (ICTs), globalization, and changing community expectations have fundamentally transformed the role of libraries. Contemporary libraries are no longer viewed merely as repositories of books; rather, they have become dynamic community institutions that facilitate knowledge creation, digital inclusion, innovation, and social interaction. This transformation has shifted library services from collection-centered operations to user-centered and community-driven engagement models, where the needs, aspirations, and participation of community members shape service delivery (Rahmanova, Aytan 2025)

The concept of community engagement has emerged as a central philosophy in modern librarianship. Community engagement refers to the collaborative process through which libraries actively work with individuals, groups, institutions, and stakeholders to identify local needs, co-create relevant services, and promote sustainable social development. Unlike traditional outreach programmes that focus primarily on disseminating information, community engagement emphasizes partnership, participation, inclusiveness, and shared responsibility in addressing societal challenges. Through meaningful engagement, libraries contribute to improving literacy, digital competence, civic participation, economic empowerment, and social cohesion across diverse populations (Sung, Hui-Yun, Hepworth, Mark & Ragsdell, Gillian 2011)

Globally, libraries are increasingly recognized as strategic partners in achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4 (Quality Education), Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities), Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). The updated IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto affirms that libraries provide equitable access to knowledge, information, digital technologies, and cultural resources while fostering inclusive participation in knowledge societies. Similarly, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) emphasizes that libraries are essential development partners capable of empowering communities through innovative and responsive services (Chuenchom, Sutthinan,et al 2022)

Innovation has therefore become indispensable in ensuring that libraries remain relevant in an increasingly digital and knowledge-driven society. Library innovation extends beyond the adoption of new technologies to include the creative redesign of services, spaces, programmes, and partnerships that respond effectively to evolving community needs. Innovative libraries integrate emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, makerspaces, virtual and augmented reality, digital repositories, mobile applications, and data-driven services to improve information access and user experiences. At the same time, innovation encompasses organizational creativity, flexible service models, collaborative problem-solving, and the development of inclusive programmes that reflect local cultural and socioeconomic realities (Yadav, Upasana & Aroslin, Stephen 2024)

Creativity complements innovation by enabling librarians to design unique and context-sensitive solutions that strengthen relationships with their communities. Creative library practices include storytelling festivals, community archives, local history digitization projects, reading clubs, entrepreneurship support programmes, health information campaigns, digital literacy workshops, makerspaces, cultural exhibitions, and participatory

learning activities. These initiatives transform libraries into vibrant social spaces where citizens not only access information but also collaborate, innovate, acquire new skills, and contribute to community development. Such approaches have proven particularly valuable in developing countries, where libraries often serve as accessible public institutions capable of reducing information poverty and bridging the digital divide. (Abubakar, Abidina Attahir & Isa Sidi 2018)

In developing countries such as Nigeria, the imperative for innovative and creative community engagement is especially significant. Rapid population growth, youth unemployment, inadequate digital skills, educational inequalities, and limited access to quality information continue to constrain socio-economic development. Libraries possess enormous potential to address these challenges by providing inclusive learning environments, free access to digital resources, information literacy training, entrepreneurial support, and platforms for civic engagement. Nevertheless, many libraries still face challenges such as inadequate funding, obsolete infrastructure, insufficient technological facilities, limited professional capacity, and weak institutional partnerships, which hinder their ability to maximize community impact. These realities underscore the need for a paradigm shift toward innovative, collaborative, and community-responsive library services (Deinibiteim, M 2026).

Recent global library strategies further reinforce this direction. The IFLA Strategy 2024–2029 and the IFLA Trend Report 2024 envision libraries as active agents of sustainable development, digital transformation, lifelong learning, and community resilience. These frameworks encourage libraries to strengthen partnerships, embrace emerging technologies, promote digital equity, and redesign services around the evolving needs of their communities. They also recognize libraries as innovation ecosystems where knowledge creation, creativity, and community participation intersect to generate meaningful social impact (Dezuanni, Michael et al 2025)

Against this background, this position paper argues that community engagement through library innovations and creativity is fundamental to the future relevance and sustainability of libraries. It contends that by embracing user-centered service design, technological innovation, creative programming, and strategic collaborations, libraries can become transformative institutions that foster inclusive learning, social inclusion, digital empowerment, and community resilience. The paper therefore advocates for a shift from traditional service delivery models toward innovative community-centered ecosystems capable of supporting sustainable national development and the realization of inclusive knowledge societies.

Statement of the Problem

Libraries are widely acknowledged as critical institutions for promoting equitable access to information, lifelong learning, digital inclusion, and community development. Over the past two decades, the role of libraries has evolved beyond traditional collection management to encompass community-centered services that address educational, technological, cultural, and socio-economic needs. This transformation has been accelerated by rapid advances in digital technologies, changing information-seeking behaviors, and increasing demand for participatory and inclusive public services. Consequently, libraries are expected to function as innovation hubs that facilitate knowledge creation, creativity, collaboration, and community empowerment (Igbinovia, Magnus Aiyebelehin, Afebuameh 2023).

Despite these evolving expectations, many libraries, particularly in developing countries, continue to operate within conventional service models that prioritize collection management over active community engagement. Library programmes in many institutions remain largely passive, with limited emphasis on user participation, collaborative learning, digital innovation, and community-driven service delivery. As a result, libraries often struggle to attract diverse user groups, particularly young people, entrepreneurs, persons with disabilities, and marginalized populations who increasingly rely on alternative digital platforms for information and learning (Aabø & Audunson, 2023).

The growing digital divide has further complicated the ability of libraries to fulfill their social mission. While access to digital technologies and online information has expanded globally, significant disparities persist in digital literacy, internet connectivity, and access to reliable information resources, especially across many African countries. According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU, 2024), although global internet usage continues to rise, millions of people in low- and middle-income countries remain digitally excluded. This situation limits opportunities for education, employment, innovation, and civic participation. Libraries are strategically positioned to bridge these gaps through digital literacy initiatives, technology-enabled services, and inclusive community programmes; however, inadequate infrastructure, insufficient funding, obsolete technologies, and limited staff competencies often constrain their effectiveness (Kinney, Bo 2010, ITU, 2024).

In Nigeria, these challenges are even more pronounced. Many public, school, and academic libraries continue to face chronic underfunding, inadequate ICT facilities, poor internet connectivity, limited professional development opportunities, and insufficient policy support for innovative service delivery. Although several libraries have introduced automation, electronic resources, and digital services, the integration of creative community engagement initiatives such as makerspaces, digital innovation labs, mobile libraries, community archives, entrepreneurship support programmes, and participatory outreach remains limited and uneven across institutions. Consequently, libraries have not fully realized their potential as catalysts for community transformation and sustainable development (George Lukmon et al 2025).

Another critical concern is the inadequate institutional emphasis on user-centered service design. Modern library users increasingly expect flexible, collaborative, and technology-driven services that respond to their changing educational, social, and economic needs. However, many libraries still develop programmes based primarily on institutional priorities rather than systematic community needs assessments and participatory planning. This disconnect often results in low utilization of library services, reduced public visibility, and declining relevance in an increasingly digital information environment (**Ashikuzzaman** MD 2026).

Furthermore, while international organizations such as UNESCO and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) have consistently advocated for libraries as key partners in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the translation of these global frameworks into local practice remains inadequate in many developing countries. Weak collaboration between libraries, educational institutions, civil society organizations, local governments, and private-sector stakeholders continues to limit the sustainability and impact of innovative community engagement initiatives (UNESCO, 2022; IFLA, 2024 & **Israel Dabengwa** 2025).

These challenges highlight a significant gap between the evolving role expected of modern libraries and the realities of library service delivery in many communities. Without deliberate investment in innovation, creativity, strategic partnerships, and community-centered programming, libraries risk becoming increasingly marginalized within contemporary knowledge ecosystems. There is therefore an urgent need to reposition libraries as active agents of community engagement through innovative and creative practices that enhance digital inclusion, lifelong learning, social cohesion, and sustainable community development. This position paper addresses this need by advocating for innovative approaches that strengthen the relationship between libraries and the communities they serve while providing policy directions for sustainable implementation.

Objectives of the Study

1. examine the concept of community engagement, library innovation, and creativity in contemporary library and information services;
2. identify innovative and creative library practices that enhance community engagement and promote inclusive access to information;
3. examine the benefits of community engagement through innovative library services for lifelong learning, digital inclusion, and community development;
4. identify the challenges hindering effective implementation of innovative and creative community engagement initiatives in libraries; and
5. Propose policy and practical strategies for strengthening community engagement through library innovations and creativity.

Research Questions

1. What are the concepts of community engagement, library innovation, and creativity in contemporary library and information services?
2. What innovative and creative library practices enhance community engagement and improve access to information?
3. What are the benefits of innovative library services in promoting lifelong learning, digital inclusion, and sustainable community development?
4. What challenges hinder the effective implementation of innovative and creative community engagement initiatives in libraries?
5. What policy and practical strategies can strengthen community engagement through library innovations and creativity?

Literature Review

Recent empirical studies demonstrate that innovative and creative library services have significantly transformed libraries into community-centered institutions that promote lifelong learning, digital inclusion, social cohesion, and sustainable development.

A quantitative study by Abimbola (2025) investigated the role of school libraries in fostering community engagement among in-school adolescents in Nigeria. The study found that libraries providing digital literacy instruction, collaborative learning activities, and community-based programmes significantly enhanced students' social participation and learning outcomes. The research further revealed that inadequate infrastructure, insufficient funding, and shortages of skilled personnel remain the major constraints limiting the capacity

of Nigerian school libraries to function as effective community engagement centers. The study recommended stronger policy support, investment in digital infrastructure, and continuous professional development for librarians. (**journals.library.ualberta.ca**)

Similarly, Rahmah et al. (2025) examined Indonesia's Social Inclusion-Based Public Library Transformation Programme using a qualitative case study approach. The findings showed that innovative library programmes substantially improved access to information, digital literacy, entrepreneurship, employment opportunities, and community participation. The study concluded that libraries implementing community-driven innovations contributed significantly to local economic development and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly through skills acquisition and creative economy initiatives. (**DOI**)

Using a mixed-methods approach involving a systematic review of sixty-eight empirical studies and multiple case studies, Sulham, Reza, and Rahimi (2025) investigated participatory co-creation models in academic and public libraries. The study established that involving community members in designing and implementing library services significantly improved user satisfaction, service relevance, digital literacy, and social inclusion. The researchers emphasized that librarians should increasingly function as innovators and facilitators who collaborate with users in developing responsive library services rather than merely delivering traditional information services. (**research.adra.ac.id**)

An exploratory study by Bouaamri and Otike (2026) assessed the application of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) principles in African public libraries. Through comparative analysis of library innovations across several African countries, the researchers found that user-centered technological design significantly enhanced accessibility, usability, and community participation. The study argued that culturally responsive digital technologies improve library relevance, particularly in multilingual and resource-constrained environments common across Africa. (**DOI**)

In India, Mittal and Mehta (2026) employed Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to investigate the relationship between transdisciplinary collaboration, community participation, and sustainability of digital libraries in higher education institutions. The findings demonstrated that active community participation mediates the relationship between institutional collaboration and sustainable digital library development. The authors concluded that involving users in planning, evaluating, and improving digital library services strengthens long-term sustainability and enhances knowledge sharing. (**Springer Link**)

A practitioner-based study by Sharma (2025) evaluated the implementation of digital storytelling as an innovative engagement strategy in an academic library. The initiative attracted more than 7,200 participants over two years, increased library visitation by approximately 20%, and improved users' digital and multimedia literacy skills. The study concluded that creative programmes such as digital storytelling not only preserve local culture but also transform libraries into participatory learning environments where users become active creators of knowledge rather than passive consumers of information. (**ScienceDirect**)

A systematic literature review conducted by Mustofa, Wuryan, and Sentiana (2025) synthesized studies published between 2019 and 2025 on digital communication strategies in libraries. The review found that academic and public libraries increasingly employ social media, artificial intelligence, virtual reference services, and assistive technologies to improve accessibility and digital inclusion. Nevertheless, governance issues, ethical

concerns relating to artificial intelligence, and inadequate digital competencies among library personnel continue to impede effective implementation of innovative digital services. (**conference.ut.ac.id**)

Earlier qualitative research by Koontz and colleagues (2021) on social innovation in public libraries found that innovative community programmes—including educational initiatives, networking activities, cultural events, and social support services—strengthened community resilience and increased library visibility. However, the study also identified structural, organizational, financial, and personal barriers that constrain innovation in many libraries. (**ScienceDirect**)

Another systematic review focusing on African academic libraries by Shikali and Muneja (2024) found that libraries adopted various technological innovations during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, including virtual reference services, social media engagement, institutional repositories, and expanded electronic resource access. Despite these advances, inadequate ICT infrastructure, unreliable internet connectivity, and limited digital literacy among users continued to restrict equitable access to library resources across many African countries. (**arXiv**)

Collectively, these empirical studies demonstrate that innovative library practices—including digital literacy programmes, makerspaces, participatory service design, mobile technologies, community partnerships, digital storytelling, and user-centered technologies—enhance community engagement, improve digital inclusion, and strengthen libraries' contributions to sustainable development. However, they consistently identify inadequate funding, insufficient infrastructure, technological limitations, and inadequate staff competencies as persistent barriers to successful implementation.

Knowledge Gap

Although existing empirical studies provide substantial evidence on library innovation, digital transformation, and community engagement, several gaps remain.

First, most studies examine library innovation, digital services, or community engagement as separate phenomena, with relatively few adopting an integrated perspective that explains how innovation and creativity jointly strengthen sustainable community engagement.

Second, a significant proportion of the available empirical evidence originates from Europe, North America, and Asia, while comparatively fewer studies focus on Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa, where socioeconomic realities, digital inequalities, and resource constraints require context-specific approaches to innovative library service delivery. (**DOI**)

Third, many existing studies concentrate on technological innovations such as digital repositories, virtual services, and electronic resources, with limited attention given to creative, culturally responsive, and community-driven engagement strategies, including co-creation, indigenous knowledge preservation, makerspaces, entrepreneurship support, and participatory outreach initiatives.

Finally, much of the literature is empirical and evaluative, offering limited discussion of the policy implications and strategic frameworks needed to institutionalize innovative community engagement practices in libraries, particularly in developing countries.

This position paper addresses these gaps by synthesizing contemporary evidence and proposing a holistic framework that integrates community engagement, library innovation, and creativity as complementary strategies for repositioning libraries as inclusive knowledge

hubs, catalysts for social development, and key contributors to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Discussion

The contemporary library operates in an environment characterized by rapid technological advancement, changing user expectations, increasing digital information, and complex social challenges. Consequently, libraries can no longer rely solely on traditional collection-centered service models but must evolve into dynamic, community-oriented institutions that foster innovation, creativity, and inclusive development. The empirical literature reviewed in this paper demonstrates that innovative library services significantly enhance community participation, digital literacy, lifelong learning, social cohesion, and local economic development. These findings reinforce the argument that community engagement is not merely an extension of library services but should constitute the core philosophy underpinning modern librarianship (IFLA, 2024).

The discussion reveals that innovation in libraries extends beyond the acquisition of digital technologies. Rather, innovation encompasses the redesign of library spaces, services, programmes, partnerships, and organizational practices to address the evolving needs of communities. Initiatives such as makerspaces, digital literacy programmes, mobile library services, community archives, entrepreneurship support centres, artificial intelligence-assisted reference services, and participatory outreach programmes have repositioned libraries globally as hubs for creativity, collaboration, and knowledge exchange. Such innovations strengthen libraries' social relevance by transforming users from passive consumers of information into active participants in knowledge creation and community development (Lankes, 2022).

Furthermore, creativity has emerged as an indispensable component of effective community engagement. Creative librarianship requires professionals to develop locally relevant, culturally responsive, and inclusive programmes that reflect the unique characteristics of the communities they serve. Rather than adopting standardized approaches, libraries should engage community members in identifying their information needs, designing services, and evaluating programme outcomes. This participatory approach promotes ownership, increases utilization of library resources, and strengthens public trust in libraries as responsive community institutions (Aabø & Audunson, 2023).

The review also highlights the growing importance of digital inclusion in contemporary library practice. As governments, educational institutions, businesses, and healthcare providers increasingly migrate their services online, digital literacy has become an essential prerequisite for social and economic participation. Libraries remain among the few public institutions capable of providing free access to computers, internet connectivity, digital skills training, and information literacy programmes, particularly for disadvantaged and marginalized populations. Consequently, libraries play a critical role in reducing digital inequalities and supporting the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially Goals 4, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 16 (UNESCO, 2022).

However, despite these opportunities, the literature consistently identifies several barriers that continue to undermine innovative community engagement in many developing countries, including Nigeria. Chronic underfunding, inadequate ICT infrastructure, unreliable electricity supply, limited internet connectivity, obsolete technologies, insufficient professional development, and weak institutional partnerships significantly constrain libraries' capacity to implement innovative services. These challenges suggest that

technological innovation alone cannot transform libraries without supportive governance structures, sustainable financing mechanisms, and strategic policy interventions (International Telecommunication Union [ITU], 2024).

The discussion further indicates that effective community engagement requires strong collaboration between libraries and key stakeholders. Partnerships with educational institutions, local governments, non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations, private-sector organizations, technology companies, and development agencies provide opportunities for resource mobilization, programme expansion, and knowledge sharing. Such collaborative networks enable libraries to deliver more responsive services while addressing complex community challenges that extend beyond traditional information provision. The collaborative model also strengthens institutional sustainability by diversifying funding sources and enhancing community ownership of library programmes.

From a policy perspective, there is an urgent need for governments to reposition libraries within national development frameworks. National information, education, and digital transformation policies should explicitly recognize libraries as strategic institutions for promoting lifelong learning, digital inclusion, innovation, and community resilience. Public investment should therefore prioritize the modernization of library infrastructure, provision of high-speed internet connectivity, acquisition of emerging technologies, and development of flexible learning spaces that encourage collaboration and creativity.

Equally important is the need to strengthen the professional competencies of librarians. Continuous professional development programmes should equip library personnel with skills in digital technologies, artificial intelligence, data management, community needs assessment, project management, entrepreneurship support, advocacy, communication, and innovation management. Future librarians should increasingly function as facilitators, educators, digital mentors, innovation managers, and community development practitioners rather than custodians of information resources alone.

The policy discussion also underscores the necessity of institutionalizing user-centered service design within library management practices. Libraries should establish mechanisms for conducting regular community needs assessments, involving users in programme planning, and evaluating service outcomes through evidence-based assessment frameworks. Performance indicators should extend beyond traditional measures such as collection size and circulation statistics to include social impact indicators, digital inclusion outcomes, user satisfaction, community participation, learning outcomes, and contributions to local development.

Furthermore, policy frameworks should encourage libraries to adopt emerging technologies responsibly. While artificial intelligence, big data analytics, cloud computing, virtual reality, and digital repositories present enormous opportunities for improving service delivery, their adoption should be guided by ethical principles relating to privacy, transparency, accessibility, inclusiveness, and intellectual freedom. Libraries should therefore develop institutional policies that promote responsible technology governance while safeguarding users' rights and equitable access to information.

Finally, achieving sustainable community engagement requires long-term commitment from policymakers, library administrators, professional associations, educational institutions, and development partners. Investment in innovative library services should not be viewed as an operational expenditure but as a strategic investment in human capital development, social

inclusion, knowledge economies, and national development. Libraries that successfully integrate innovation, creativity, and community participation are better positioned to respond to emerging societal challenges and remain relevant in an increasingly digital world.

Overall, this paper maintains that the future sustainability of libraries depends largely on their ability to embrace innovative thinking, creative service delivery, and collaborative community engagement. By repositioning libraries as inclusive innovation ecosystems, policymakers and library professionals can significantly enhance access to information, strengthen community resilience, promote lifelong learning, and contribute meaningfully to the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Conclusion

Libraries have undergone a remarkable transformation from being traditional repositories of books and information resources to becoming dynamic centers for learning, innovation, collaboration, and community development. As demonstrated throughout this paper, community engagement has become a defining characteristic of contemporary librarianship, requiring libraries to move beyond conventional service delivery towards innovative, user-centered, and participatory approaches. In an era characterized by rapid technological advancement, digital transformation, and evolving societal needs, libraries must continually innovate and creatively respond to the expectations of the diverse communities they serve.

The review of empirical literature indicates that innovative library practices—including digital literacy programmes, makerspaces, mobile library services, community-driven collections, digital storytelling, participatory outreach initiatives, and strategic partnerships—significantly enhance access to information, lifelong learning, digital inclusion, and social cohesion. These initiatives also strengthen libraries' relevance as institutions that contribute meaningfully to local development, knowledge creation, and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Creativity in library service delivery further enables librarians to design culturally responsive, flexible, and locally relevant programmes that empower community members to become active participants in knowledge production rather than passive consumers of information.

Despite these promising developments, the paper acknowledges that many libraries, particularly in developing countries such as Nigeria, continue to face significant challenges. These include inadequate funding, insufficient technological infrastructure, unreliable internet connectivity, limited professional capacity, weak institutional partnerships, and inadequate policy support for innovation. Unless these constraints are systematically addressed, libraries may struggle to fully realize their potential as agents of community transformation and sustainable development.

This paper therefore concludes that the future relevance and sustainability of libraries depend largely on their capacity to embrace innovation, creativity, and collaborative community engagement. Libraries should no longer be evaluated solely by the size of their collections but by the quality of their social impact, their responsiveness to community needs, and their contributions to education, digital empowerment, social inclusion, and national development. By repositioning themselves as community-centered innovation ecosystems, libraries will remain indispensable institutions within contemporary knowledge societies.

Recommendations

1. Adopt community-centered and innovative library services: Libraries should prioritize user-centered service delivery by actively engaging community members in identifying their information needs, designing programmes, and evaluating services. Innovative initiatives such as makerspaces, digital literacy programmes, mobile library services, community archives, and participatory outreach should be integrated into routine library operations.
2. Increase government and institutional investment in library development: Federal, state, and local governments, as well as parent institutions, should provide adequate funding for modern library infrastructure, high-speed internet connectivity, digital technologies, and creative learning spaces. Sustainable financing is essential for libraries to effectively support education, digital inclusion, and community development.
3. Strengthen the capacity of librarians through continuous professional development: Library professionals should receive regular training in emerging technologies, artificial intelligence, digital literacy instruction, community engagement strategies, innovation management, and user-centered service design to enable them to meet the changing needs of their communities.

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