



# The social impact of the Public Library on access to productive inclusion

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## ABSTRACT

Contemporary society is undergoing intense technological transformation, driving far-reaching social impacts. Such dynamics are not new to libraries; in the Middle Ages, they housed vast collections managed by monks and primarily served members of the Church and the nobility. During the Renaissance, libraries transitioned into public institutions, serving the informational needs of their communities. In the 20th century, the advent of computers, information technology, and telecommunications revolutionized the use of electronic media and tools, once again reshaping the library's role and function. The 21st century has introduced technologies capable of transforming physical and material realities into virtual and digital environments. The internet, in particular, has redefined information formats and shifted the library's focus from collection ownership to access provision. Throughout this historical trajectory, the concept of the user has also evolved. The reader of Antiquity, who once spent hours immersed in library texts, has become today's user, engaging with diverse collections accessible from virtually anywhere. Despite these advancements, building a reading public remains a major challenge, particularly in Latin America. This issue deepens existing social inequalities, especially when considering the role of libraries and reading in employment and income generation. In many cases, public libraries remain overlooked, a situation that weakens their ties to the communities they are intended to serve. Clearly, those excluded from the Gutenberg revolution are unlikely to benefit from the current technological revolution, thus risking exclusion from the information society altogether. This paper, therefore, proposes employing trend analysis, discourse analysis, scenario planning, comparative studies, financial return assessments, and impact evaluation methods to reframe public libraries – both as institutions with a social mandate and as engines for employment and income generation.

**Keywords:** information society; public library; reading promotion; formation of a reading public; technological revolution.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Profound changes driven by globalization in recent decades, coupled with the internet's fluidity and transformative social impact on libraries, necessitate ongoing updates not only to library services but also to the conceptualization of the library itself to meet contemporary societal demands. Despite significant progress made by libraries and their professionals, and noteworthy achievements already attained, these institutions must continue evolving to align with the model required by today's world (Suaiden, 2017).

Since the 1960s, institutions such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), and the Regional Center for Book Development in Latin America and the Caribbean (CERLALC), along with national Brazilian entities like the Instituto Nacional do Livro, the Biblioteca Nacional, the Câmara Brasileira do Livro, and the Sindicato Nacional dos Editores de Livros, have made considerable investments in Latin America, aiming to raise awareness among regional governments about the importance of establishing public libraries to promote access to books and knowledge. Nevertheless, many political leaders assumed power without personal experience in reading or using libraries. Consequently, they made it clear that promoting books and libraries was not part of their government agendas (Suaiden, 2014). In Brazil, early efforts to foster reading began under the Vargas administration with the creation of the Instituto Nacional do Livro. The Biblioteca Nacional and the Fundação Nacional do Livro Infantil e Juvenil also played key roles in shaping a culture of reading. Brazil's first public library model drew on standards from more developed countries that shared little cultural affinity with Brazil. As a result, adopting this model led to several challenges. From a social perspective, the public often perceived libraries as elitist spaces, as book depositories, or merely as venues for completing school assignments. These perceptions created tensions between information professionals and the broader public (Suaiden, 2014).

For many years, the prevailing view cast libraries primarily as institutions tasked with preserving collections – a view that restricted book circulation and dissemination. As Bandino (2000) points out, this perspective resulted in the creation of “useless” libraries and underscored the need to redefine their purpose: libraries must be circulating institutions, not merely conserving ones. When a library opens its doors to the public, it becomes a community anchor – an access point to books and a facilitator of reading as part of everyday life. This context highlights the library's crucial role in engaging with the outside world and embracing its responsibilities in education, training, and the dissemination of a nation's cultural heritage (Suaiden, 2014).

In the emerging information society, the preservation paradigm lost priority. This societal model fundamentally demonstrates that information generates power – especially when disseminated rapidly, or ideally, in real time. The ability to access information immediately, and consequently transform it into knowledge to generate products, services, and wealth, drove the paradigmatic shift brought about by the current technological revolution. Consequently,

information gained unprecedented value, prompting companies, in their quest for global market competitiveness, to adopt technologies, theories, concepts, and tools aimed at improving product and service quality, alongside overall competitiveness (Suaiden, 2014).

In the late 1980s, some experts envisioned the information society as an inclusive one – characterized by shared resources, collective well-being, and the gradual elimination of social inequality. However, as the new century approached, the debate took a different turn. Many scholars began to characterize the information society as a perverse or even neo-feudal structure, where power lies in the hands of those who control the means of communication, and inequality continues to deepen (Suaiden, 2014).

In the foreword to *Pobreza: un tema impostergable*, Zumbado (1994) poses a critical question: When does a society truly progress? While the question may seem self-evident, it is not – especially since indicators addressing inequality and social well-being have long remained vague or abstract. True progress entails both improvements in material living conditions and advances in human development. In the economic domain, however, policymakers and experts have often prioritized the efficient dissemination of information over the formulation of policies aimed at eradicating inequality – as if inequality were a structural condition to which society must simply adapt. Although this stance may appear disheartening, it has become increasingly clear that in a globalized world, only those with access to information and knowledge enjoy greater opportunities for improved quality of life – and even for participating in structures of power (Suaiden, 2014).

The literature offers evidence in support of the hypothesis advanced in this study. Klikberg's (1994) claim that poverty and democracy are incompatible has found limited resonance in political discourse, where democracy is still largely framed as a governmental system that guarantees freedom of expression – even if public officials are elected by a largely illiterate population (Suaiden, 2014). Regarding Latin America, Klikberg observes:

[...] na terra mais desigual do mundo, a equidade parece não ter muita importância na busca de soluções para os difíceis problemas econômicos e sociais. Pode-se até observar que alguns dos trabalhos mais importantes e recentes sobre as dificuldades da região neste campo foram produzidos fora dela, no mundo desenvolvido, onde a América Latina é vista, com frequência, como o caso “antiexemplar” mais relevante em matéria dos efeitos regressivos decorrentes de altos níveis de desigualdade (Klikberg, 2000, p. 15)<sup>1</sup>.

Although most Latin American constitutions formally recognize the importance of democratic information access, this right remains largely unrealized, restricted primarily to a small population segment. The majority are consequently left on the margins of citizenship, often unaware of their societal rights and responsibilities and unable to access an increasingly demanding formal labor market.

<sup>1</sup> Translation: “[...] in the most unequal land in the world, equity seems to have little relevance in the search for solutions to the region's difficult economic and social problems. It can even be observed that some of the most important and recent works on these challenges have been produced outside the region, in the developed world, where Latin America is often viewed as the most striking ‘anti-example’ of the regressive effects stemming from high levels of inequality.” (Klikberg, 2000, p. 15, editorial translation).

This marginalized segment constitutes the vast majority of the socially excluded. Typically, individuals in this group lack literacy, personal identification documents, and the skills required for employment, leading employers to consider them unskilled labor. Many social issues – such as child prostitution and violence – stem from this group, which also sees the highest concentration of individuals involved in criminal activity, a phenomenon growing at an alarming rate. This exclusion from cultural, educational, and social processes affects a significant portion of the population (Suaiden, 2014).

Examining the historical relationship between information and social inclusion allows us to draw upon the work of several authors who have shaped this understanding. According to Pacheco (1995), contemporary information functions as a disposable product requiring constant renewal. Its defining characteristic – rapid creation, consumption, and disposal – ultimately hinders individuals' ability to think critically, evaluate, and interpret the information they receive. Pacheco identifies several effects of this process:

- an increasing dependence on information about the actions of others to guide our own; unlike in the past, behavior is no longer informed by accumulated knowledge but by rapidly circulating information;
- the fragmentation of human knowledge, which is no longer anchored solely in national culture but also shaped by dispersed elements from diverse cultures encountered through everyday information flows;
- the surpassing of human memory by ease of access to external sources; significant investments are now directed toward minimizing the cognitive effort required to remember. What matters today is not only what we know, but how quickly we can retrieve knowledge through fast-access tools and mechanisms. Databases are becoming massive marketplaces, offering products so specialized that only a small number of highly trained individuals can use them effectively. Since this group represents a tiny fraction of the population, these “cyber supermarkets” increasingly offer instant formulas – products designed for rapid preparation and immediate consumption (Suaiden, 2014).

Regarding information retrieval and knowledge production, inclusion benefits only a small societal segment. Barreto (1994) argues that the central goal of the information society is to generate knowledge, supported by the production of information. This production unfolds through informational structures – such as libraries, databases, information systems, archives, and museums – which influence the effectiveness of knowledge creation. These structures are responsible for producing knowledge, organizing information, and transforming data, although each follows distinct operational logics. Tasks related to information are shaped by several factors – especially technological ones – designed to maximize technical and economic efficiency. While efficiency plays a crucial role in organizing the overwhelming volume of information, it does not, by itself, produce knowledge (Suaiden, 2014).

According to Barreto, the tools and mechanisms for classifying and organizing information align with the prevailing ideology – driven by technological imperatives focused on

producing vast quantities of stored material. Consequently, these tools often conflict with the goal of knowledge production, prioritizing quantitative criteria over the qualitative dimensions essential to that function.

Furthermore, stored material distribution follows a logic where larger available quantities necessitate a broader consumer base to cover costs. Distribution strategies are therefore developed to target distinct consumer groups and selectively allocate stored material among them. This distribution and differentiation process ensures that privileged individuals gain exclusive access to certain information types, meaning such a model restricts selective information to a minority (Suaiden, 2014).

In an information society, knowledge production frequently generates wealth via patents, consolidating the hegemony of developed countries over others, a dynamic clearly exemplified by Latin America. As this hegemony intensifies, developed nations struggle with terminology for the rest of the world, uncertain even how to classify these regions. Initial labels like “underdeveloped” gave way to the more refined term “developing countries.” However, it was never clarified how long a country must develop to be considered “developed,” or if it could revert to an “underdeveloped” status. Latin America was also once considered part of the “Third World,” yet clarification was never provided on when – or if – the Third World might become the “Second World.” Nevertheless, in a globalized world, regional classification increasingly depends on the informational and knowledge processes capable of driving development (Suaiden, 2023).

This dependence on development inevitably leads to both misinformation and a lack of information – two critical dimensions of social exclusion. These conditions disproportionately affect socially and economically disadvantaged groups, severely restricting their opportunities for advancement. Misinformation involves the dissemination of false or manipulated information; lack of information leaves society without the tools to discern, analyze, critique, or make informed decisions. In the current context of proliferating fake news, public libraries must assert their role in validating information and promoting media literacy (Suaiden, 2023).

Castro and Ribeiro (1997) argue that contrasting with the information society is another, more populous one – the society of misinformation/lack of information. This latter society is rarely discussed, either overshadowed by the former or failing to become a focal point within Information Science. To illustrate, the authors cite an excerpt from a major São Paulo newspaper:

Silvana, 17 anos, que havia sido abandonada na Praça da Catedral aos 15 anos de idade, morreu de Aids em um hospital público de São Paulo. Quando foi entrevistada antes de sua morte, ela disse que não sabia para que serviam os preservativos (Suaiden, 2023, p. 6)<sup>2</sup>.

2 Translation: “Silvana, 17 years old, who had been abandoned in Cathedral Square at the age of 15, died of AIDS in a public hospital in São Paulo. When interviewed before her death, she said she did not know what condoms were for” (Suaiden, 2023, p. 6, editorial translation).

This exemplifies an extreme lack of information, particularly considering the Ministry of Health's massive investment at the time to disseminate information about the disease (Suaiden, 2023). In the graduate program in Information Science at the Universidade de Brasília, the course "Information Science and Society" featured a sociodrama based on Silvana's case. In this dramatization, she undertakes a brief journey from Praça da Sé to the Mário de Andrade Municipal Public Library, allowing for an exploration of social inclusion issues. The analysis covered factors contributing to social exclusion, including the imposing architecture, passersby's glances, the library's security system, the service desk interactions, and the girl's low self-esteem. The play concludes with Silvana attempting to shake the librarian's hand but being unable to overcome the barriers separating her from the library. This study revealed that, both fictionally and realistically, libraries are absent from the lived experience of a large population segment, and information professionals often lack adequate preparation to change this reality and function as agents of social inclusion (Suaiden, 2014).

The declining image of traditional libraries is often attributed to information professionals' adherence to knowledge acquired during their academic training. In Italy, for instance, the successful "Libraries Without Borders" program positively contributed to democratic information access. The project employed the practical method of "spreading reading through reading," granting book access in locations and at times typically designated for other purposes – such as public squares, nightclubs, beaches, churches, and sports centers. Initially, information professionals steeped in technical processing rules harshly criticized the project. The concept of an open, public-oriented library intimidated them, fueled by the belief that transferring power to the public would diminish librarians' authority. While this reaction also stemmed from a lack of performance indicators, the project's success ultimately demonstrated that democratic information access actually reinforces the authority of information professionals (Suaiden, 2014).

It is therefore reasonable to conclude that social exclusion is also a process of disinformation. This process involves not merely a lack of information or the spread of false information, but also encompasses actions that, while not overtly commercial or political, are clearly designed by their disseminators to achieve specific objectives. In 90% of cases, the goal extends beyond influencing the masses to targeting specific audiences. High-level disinformation distorts specialized, technically significant information. Consequently, given the limited access to education and culture in the Global South, disinformation significantly contributes to exclusion and undermines the exercise of citizenship (Suaiden, 2014).

Because globalization prioritizes economic and material outcomes, regions where disinformation or lack of information prevails face automatic exclusion from development processes. Uninformed populations cannot produce the desired outcomes and are ultimately marginalized. This reality affects not only individuals but also institutions, as intellectual capital holds the capacity to transform information into knowledge and knowledge into wealth, thereby generating intelligent organizations.



Broadly speaking, universities often fail as examples of intelligent organizations due to difficulties in responding effectively to real labor market needs and addressing societal problems. It could be further argued that libraries also fall short as intelligent organizations, primarily because they struggle to remain attuned to their communities' information needs and face challenges in fostering critical readers and information producers. Typically, what results is the creation of information-dependent users, constituting a precarious form of inclusion within the information society (Suaiden, 2014).

Today, considering the historical trajectory of knowledge, informational infrastructure clearly represents a fundamental element for the development of any citizen, institution, or nation. The nexus of information and social inclusion is intrinsically linked to advancements in science, technology, and education, and to the role information plays within that process (Suaiden, 2023). We are currently witnessing major transformations in the information landscape. Open access to information, open data from scientific research, open science, and digital humanization are movements generating new possibilities for knowledge production and sharing. As these movements advance, science adopts new contours, embraces new causes, and engages with new communities (Suaiden, 2023). According to Albagli (2015, p. 14):<sup>3</sup>

A complexidade dos desafios e a urgência das questões sociais e ambientais que se apresentam às ciências impõem, por sua vez, facilitar a colaboração e o compartilhamento de dados, informações e descobertas.

Today, the scope of openness extends beyond merely free access to published articles and books to encompass open scientific data and open education. In essence, contemporary discourse challenges not only the very notion of “openness” but also necessitates a fundamental rethinking of “science” itself (Suaiden, 2023) .

## **CONTEXTUALIZATION**

Issues such as the low visibility of public libraries, a growing distance from books, the absence of a widespread reading public, and the elitization of reading contribute to a range of problems affecting both citizenship formation and Brazilian scientific productivity. Evidence indicates that most students recently entering universities have never utilized a school or public library. These young people often struggle with interpreting written texts and commonly engage in copy-and-paste practices. They face difficulties validating information and cannot add substantive value to their written work. The situation escalates when students resort to plagiarism in producing monographs, dissertations, and theses. This pattern hinders development and significantly impacts Brazil's informational and technological dependency. An

<sup>3</sup> Translation: “The complexity of today's challenges and the urgency of social and environmental issues confronting the sciences demand, in turn, the facilitation of collaboration and the sharing of data, information, and discoveries” (Albagli, 2015, p. 14, editorial translation).

important indicator supporting this analysis is Chile's surpassing Brazil in patent registrations. This disparity arguably reflects the quality of the respective informational infrastructures, which directly influences educational quality and leads to such comparative indicators (Suaiden, 2018).

## **The Public Library**

Historically, public libraries originated with significant socially relevant purposes. In the United States, for example, their establishment aimed to preserve democracy, while in many other countries, they symbolize major social transformations. In some regions, the public library, alongside the church and school, is an integral part of the local landscape. Numerous examples exist where public libraries have naturally evolved into instruments of social inclusion within such contexts. A noteworthy case is the New York Public Library, which effectively fulfilled its mission of supporting immigrants in that metropolis (Suaiden, 2014).

Why, then, are public libraries so vital in these regions? Because the products and services they offer can grant them considerable societal visibility. However, achieving such visibility is challenging in countries where public libraries often lack dedicated budget allocations, sufficient information professionals, and face frequent government questioning regarding the financial viability of their services. Most critically, visibility suffers where, as in many Latin American nations, a substantial portion of the population does not utilize public libraries (Suaiden, 2014).

Indeed, the education system's failure to recognize the library's role has incurred a high social cost concerning access to knowledge. Both schools and libraries faltered, partly because they lacked effective strategies to address diversity. Students are diverse, as are readers; consequently, building an inclusive society is impossible without appropriate techniques and methodologies for citizen development. The legacy of industrial society has left us with poor schools for the poor – and poor libraries for the poor (Suaiden, 2014).

In Brazil, even as the information society becomes a major focus of public discourse and receives growing investment, information professionals – particularly those working in public libraries – must give urgent attention to the democratization of that society. The public library has the potential to become a more effective access point, a mechanism for integrating marginalized communities into cultural and educational processes (Suaiden, 2014).

To advance this goal, the Brazilian Information Society Program (SOCINFO, 2002) outlined specific guidelines for information dissemination and digital literacy. Achieving these goals requires a series of actions, foremost among them the training of professionals who are both committed and motivated to engage actively in information access and inclusion efforts (Suaiden, 2014).

In the short term, this training would require significant changes to the Library Science curriculum, and more importantly, a transformation in professional attitudes. There is still a lack of detailed knowledge about labor market demands, and more critically, an absence



of scientifically grounded research on the social impact of library work. These gaps have led to conflicting perspectives and contributed to the low visibility of information services. In fact, the true value of library services remains unclear to much of the public. When impact assessments are conducted, even information professionals are often surprised by the results (Suaiden, 2014). Earlier studies by D'Elia (1980) and Madden (1979) in the United States aimed to understand community behavior toward library services. D'Elia's (1980) model was based on the following research variables:

- individual characteristics of users;
- knowledge of and opinions about library services;
- user accessibility to the library; and
- the degree of interaction between libraries and their users.

Respondents were selected based on three criteria:

1. whether or not they used the library;
2. how frequently they used it; and
3. the intensity of their use (Suaiden, 2014).

Frequency of use was measured by the number of visits and phone calls to the library over the previous year, while intensity referred to the duration of library visits. D'Elia (1980) concluded that the main differences between users and non-users were related to how often they attended cultural events and the amount of time they devoted to reading (Suaiden, 2014). Madden (1979), in his study on public library users and non-users, reached the following conclusions:

- Public library use is intrinsically linked to engagement in other activities: individuals involved in politics, sports, or cultural events are potential library users;
- Women who do not frequent libraries are unlikely to participate in other library programs; their interests and activities tend to be limited, offering little overlap with typical library services, given their apparent lack of interest in varying or expanding daily routines. Although many librarians dispute this finding, Madden's study indicated that the library was not a primary point of interest in these women's lives;
- Extensive advertising campaigns, particularly those addressing domestic tasks or featuring mobile libraries, could attract many non-users. Similarly, many non-user men might become users if libraries offered collections and services tailored to their specific interests;
- Frequent library users possess such diverse interests that librarians struggle to define their needs comprehensively. However, since this group represents a small population segment, allocating resources for materials aimed solely at them becomes debatable;
- Occasional users warrant greater attention; libraries should curate collections reflecting the community's expectations and aspirations.

The *Public Library Survey* conducted by the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics (2000–2001) challenged assumptions about library use and revealed the following:

- only a minority of adults visit libraries regularly;
- most loans are concentrated among a small group of users;
- library use correlates directly with educational attainment;
- library users purchase more books than non-users;
- libraries are used more for leisure than for information seeking;
- users display greater social and civic awareness than non-users;
- the most sought-after materials are newly published works (Suaiden, 2014).

Studies in both the United States and the United Kingdom have consistently shown that middle-class individuals with higher education levels constitute the most frequent library users, being better equipped culturally and educationally for engagement. Observation suggests that libraries often do not alter the existing social order but rather reinforce the status quo (Suaiden, 2014). Furthermore, educational level in these countries has proven a determining factor in library use: higher population education levels correlate with greater library utilization. Educational attainment is closely linked to social class and economic status, with the combination of lower social class and lower income resulting in minimal library use.

Researchers hypothesized that extending the average age of formal education completion was the most effective way to increase library use. Usage patterns show women frequenting libraries and borrowing books more often than men. School-age children utilize libraries more than adults. While most adults visit libraries regularly or occasionally, children tend to be moderate users (visiting four to six times annually). Among adults, individuals over 60 are typically the most regular library users. Ethnic minorities and certain other population segments exhibit low library usage rates (Suaiden, 2014). Book lending remains the most utilized service, and the primary user complaint pertains to the quality and availability of library collections, with contemporary fiction being in highest demand. Little evidence suggests widespread library use for formal research or personal educational pursuits (Suaiden, 2014).

Since 2001, the Câmara Brasileira do Livro and the Sindicato Nacional de Editores de Livros have periodically conducted the *Retrato da Leitura no Brasil* study, aiming to identify reading intensity and book access methods within the country using a probabilistic sample. The study concluded that education is decisive in book acquisition and that impoverished populations resort to alternative channels rather than bookstores. Men primarily purchase books for information or career advancement, whereas women often do so seeking inner peace or as gifts. Book prices, coupled with the population's low purchasing power, remain the publishing industry's greatest obstacle. Book ownership dynamics mirror national wealth distribution: concentrated among the few, scarce among the many.

Religion emerged as the most-read topic, and Bible reading is more frequent among lower-income groups. The number of readers increases with income. Two factors are fundamental to cultivating a culture of reading: access to education and purchasing power. A limited number of libraries was also cited as a key barrier to developing reading habits.

Employing qualitative methods to generate diagnostic insights would enable strategic planning, allowing libraries to reinforce existing strengths, align offerings with community interests, and create evidence-based indicators to guide social investments (Suaiden, 2014).

A new model of development requires highly prepared information professionals – critical thinkers who are willing to question even the name “public library.” After all, what does “public” mean if the institution serves only a narrow fraction of society? In this context, we face two alternatives: either we work with segmented communities to provide high-quality, targeted services, or we candidly rename the institution “library for small groups of students who wish to photocopy encyclopedias.” Librarians, too, must become critical thinkers, capable of challenging metrics based solely on loan and request statistics. Today’s context offers an opportunity to develop meaningful indicators that reflect the real impact of library services (Suaiden, 2014).

To develop an inclusive and effective model, shared decision-making methodologies must be adopted. These involve embracing a democratic ethos – ensuring that socially excluded groups have a voice. Now is the time to apply research techniques well-suited to public libraries, including scenario analysis, technology monitoring, brainstorming, focus groups, and benchmarking (Suaiden, 2014). These techniques were employed in my previous research on public libraries.

Scenario analysis helps identify trends and variables related to collection development, service innovation, and improvements in the community’s cultural and educational conditions. Technology monitoring tracks scientific and technological developments that may affect libraries and their users. Brainstorming fosters creativity in group problem-solving, particularly when libraries seek deeper integration into the community. Focus groups support participatory decision-making, incorporating perspectives from experts, users, non-users, and institutional partners. These discussions center around two guiding questions: What are public libraries like today? And what should they be like? As a planning tool, focus groups are vital to developing proactive strategies. Benchmarking, in turn, establishes reference models that align library services and collections with the specific informational, cultural, and educational needs of the communities they serve (Suaiden, 2014).

In addition to employing the methodologies outlined above, the new generation of information professionals working in public libraries must take on an active role in promoting reading initiatives and strategies that foster information literacy. As is often said, only a reader can create another reader. In this sense, it is essential that the information professional be a critical reader – capable of engaging with texts and ideas in ways that expand, rather than restrict, the library’s interaction with the community. More importantly, this capacity is vital for fostering the formation of a genuine reading public. To that end, the role of the information professional, coupled with systematic studies on collection development, becomes fundamental (Suaiden, 2014).

## The book and reading

A critical reader is someone who adds interpretive value to the written text. As Borges (1962) observed, readers may relate a text to other narratives, reject or forget it, elevate it to the status of a classic, or consider it a mere echo of earlier stories. All of this depends on the reader's interpretive capacity. When critical readers evolve into critical users, they begin to demand more from library services. This demand, in turn, compels libraries to improve the quality of the products and services they provide.

In the article "Novos trajetos de leitura", Niskier (2014) observes that the modern reader grows up surrounded by written words – on posters, packaging, signs, magazines, and games – making writing a constant worldly presence. Niskier notes that current technologies allow readers, with minimal technical knowledge, to intervene directly in texts. Hypertexts transfer part of the author's power to the reader, who gains the ability and autonomy to forge unique reading paths. In doing so, the reader constructs what might be termed a meta-text, annotating personal thoughts alongside those of other authors and establishing links – connections or interconnections – between documents by different creators, thereby relating to and accessing them more efficiently (Suaiden, 2014).

For Pondé (2000), urbanization, mass reading policies, and varied forms of linguistic reproduction have contributed to the expansion of the reading public and a broader cultural interest in reading. Whereas reading was once a reverent act focused on uncovering the author's intended meaning, it has now evolved into a more interactive and participatory process. The traditional hierarchy between author (as sender) and reader (as receiver) is challenged. In playful or interactive reading, the reader becomes an agent in meaning-making, assuming an authorial role in the interpretive act. This challenges the modern, individualistic concept of authorship, suggesting that the meaning of a text is not created solely by its author, but also through its reception. Although the author retains responsibility for creation, both sender and receiver now share interpretive authority. It is important to note that this bourgeois conception of authorship is relatively recent – emerging in the mid-19th century with the expansion of the press and the rise of journalism and literary professions (Suaiden, 2014).

Manguel (2002) suggests that the writer's role lies in being sensitive to the discoveries of experience. The writer, like an alchemist, transforms lived experience into words. Yet once the work is complete, the author relinquishes control. It becomes the reader's responsibility to uncover the meaning of the text – to journey backward in search of the experience that inspired it. Along this path, the reader may discover an entirely new world. In this sense, the reader assumes a political responsibility through their connection with the polis. As Mallarmé once said, their task is to "give new meaning to the words of the tribe"<sup>4</sup> (Suaiden, 2014).

Why, then, do we need critical readers? Because a profound divide exists between the world of orality and the world of writing. From a systemic and pragmatic perspective,

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4 Stéphane Mallarmé, whose real name was Étienne Mallarmé, was a French poet and literary critic (Paris, March 18, 1842, Valvins, September 9, 1898).

reading is necessary for productivity, independence, and critical engagement. Illiteracy fosters dependence and becomes a tool for ideological indoctrination. The texts that are promoted and legitimized are often those that reinforce hegemonic ideological values. Even those who become literate may remain excluded from the “world of writing,” which implies access not only to written language but also to the discursive practices and cultural references embedded within privileged domains (Suaiden, 2014).

The intimate relationship between reading and social participation was reaffirmed by Paulo Freire during his lecture “The Importance of the Act of Reading” at the 3rd Brazilian Congress on Reading (1981). Reflecting on his personal trajectory (Suaiden, 2014), Freire (1981, p. 13)<sup>5</sup> emphasized the concept of “word-world” – the reading of the world preceding the reading of the word – supporting the idea that:

enquanto ato de conhecimento e ato criador, o processo de alfabetização tem, no alfabetizando, o seu sujeito. A leitura crítica da realidade, dando-se em um processo de alfabetização e associada, sobretudo, a certas práticas claramente políticas, de mobilização e de organização pode constituir-se em instrumento de ação contra-hegemônica.

It is important to emphasize that this type of activity – one that fosters critical reading and user autonomy – is precisely what will allow public libraries to function as genuine access points to the information society. In Brazil, however, the phenomenon of the “schooling” of public libraries has significantly hindered the development of readers. This is largely due to the lack of trained professionals and the absence of robust, representative collections of children’s and young adult literature (Suaiden, 2018).

Given that the information society concurrently functions as a society of exclusion, the “passport” for participation becomes intellectual capital. This capital’s primary foundation rests upon reading and the habitual use of information – precisely the central activities facilitated by library services. This does not refer to the occasional or passive reader, whose behavior often reflects the poor quality of existing library services. Basic reading and writing skills alone are insufficient to meet contemporary demands adequately. This underscores the concept of literacy, which extends beyond mere alphabetization. If a child can read words but cannot interpret the meaning within a book, magazine, or newspaper, or if they can write words and sentences but cannot compose a coherent letter, that child is alphabetized but not truly literate (Suaiden, 2018).

Library and educational systems share significant responsibility for driving social change. The trajectory from illiterate to alphabetized, then to literate, citizen, and ultimately writer, is profoundly complex. Yet, it represents the sole path towards true professional fulfillment for information professionals and, more importantly, the route to guide their communities effectively into the information society (Suaiden, 2018).

5 Translation: “as an act of knowledge and creation, the literacy process places the learner as its subject. Critical reading of reality – when integrated into a literacy process and associated with clearly political practices of mobilization and organization – can become an instrument of counter-hegemonic action. (Freire, 1981, p. 13, editorial translation).



To navigate the challenges inherent in the knowledge society, libraries must continuously innovate. The foremost challenges involve coordinating the transition from print to digital environments and, critically, fostering users who act as producers of information rather than remaining merely dependent consumers. Addressing these two factors will be vital for building self-sustaining communities and more equitable societies (Suaiden, 2018). Recent US studies underscore the critical role of family in cultivating reading habits. Research indicates that children in homes with a prevalence of books tend to engage more seriously with their studies. This highlights the importance of a partnership encompassing the family, the library, and the quality of education provided by the school. Indicatively, in some innovative school models, the pedagogical coordination office is situated within the school library itself (Suaiden, 2018). Ultimately, the public library's role in the information society is fundamental. It is well-established that while traditional libraries build collections and good libraries build services, truly great libraries build communities (Suaiden, 2023).

## The Information Society

Manuel Castells, Spanish sociologist and professor at the University of California – alongside thinkers such as Anthony Giddens and Jürgen Habermas – belongs to a prominent group of contemporary intellectuals who advise governments on issues related to the information age and the development of networked societies. In his influential trilogy, Castells (1999) sought to construct a systemic theory of the information society, one capable of analyzing the impact of new technologies and information flows on the global division of labor, employment structures, the weakening of nation-states and trade unions, and the reorganization of mass media within a globalized, interconnected world.

His work identifies and analyzes the major global processes that have transformed economies, cultures, and societies in recent decades. Castells examines not only *how* these changes occurred but also *why*, focusing in particular on the dismantling of the modern nation-state and the legitimacy crisis facing its institutions and representatives. Within this broader context, our project considers whether the public library, too, is experiencing a legitimacy crisis, as suggested by data indicating that only a small percentage of the population regularly uses its services.

Castells (1990) argued that the late 20th century marked not only Marxism's demise but also the end of the "age of reason," positing that the "information age" would replace both. He contended it was time to develop new concepts capable of expressing the technological shifts of the preceding two decades, encapsulated in the notion of a "fourth technological revolution." A convergence of technologies integrated into a unified system enabled this revolution: microelectronics, computing (software and hardware), telecommunications/fiber-optic electronics, and even genetic bioengineering. However, Castells emphasized that these technologies alone would not have driven structural changes in markets, states, and the world



without their fortunate integration with a flexible, dynamic market. This market successfully propagated and amplified scientific outcomes (new knowledge) and technologies refined in hubs like Silicon Valley and disseminated via the World Wide Web's networks.

Consequently, developing new concepts, utilizing new information and communication technologies (ICTs), and shifting towards more attractive community-focused products and services become priorities for enhancing public library visibility.

A defining characteristic of this technological revolution is not the centralization of knowledge and information (typical of prior revolutions), but rather the capacity for immediate, easy global communication of new knowledge, information, and technologies. This occurs via interconnected global networks that simultaneously feed and integrate newer networks – networks intrinsically linked to market dynamics and economic/political power.

Castells did not overlook the “exclusionary” nature of this new development model. He acknowledged that, at most, only one-quarter of the global population had benefited, although he expressed hope this situation might be temporary. The most privileged populations reside primarily in the United States, the European Union, Japan, and Taiwan. In light of these global disparities, public libraries face the crucial task of confronting social inequalities by promoting *productive information inclusion* – initiatives supporting job and income generation.

Importantly, Castells did not attribute rising unemployment to the information society itself. Rather, he argued that technological innovation has created new forms of employment, and that job loss has largely resulted from the inability of certain labor sectors – often tied to obsolete technologies – to adapt to new economic realities. This underscores the urgency of equipping library users with the skills necessary to navigate these transformations.

Within this new paradigm, science serves not only to advance knowledge but also as a tool for improving quality of life. Reflecting on the information society's challenges and recent socio-economic crises underscores the public library's fundamental role in fostering employment and income generation. European indicators, for example, show public libraries referring over 250,000 people annually to the job market. In Rivas, Spain, the public library adopted employability as its primary goal, promoting activities like résumé/cover letter workshops and offering training courses in skilled labor and languages.

In Brazil, the same potential exists. Ivana Lins recently defended her doctoral dissertation at the Universidade Federal da Bahia, titled *Public Library, Convergences and Divergences: Chile, Colombia, and Brazil*. This comparative study explores how each of these countries is striving to construct a new public library model. Chile aims to maintain its leadership as Latin America's most advanced economy; Colombia seeks a model that can help reduce social conflict; and Brazil is in search of a model capable of integrating its population into the information society.

## Decision-making

To support decision-making appropriate for contemporary demands, information professionals bear the responsibility of identifying, analyzing, evaluating, and proposing new public library models oriented towards productive inclusion. This mandate encompasses several key actions: conducting comparative studies of innovative international public library models to identify successful practices; recognizing the information and communication technologies (ICTs) being utilized to transform traditional libraries into hybrid or electronic entities; redefining and articulating the public library's evolving social role in the 21st century; outlining a profile for the new public library centered on users and contemporary global needs; and assigning absolute priority to strengthening community social capital as a vital means of fostering employment and income generation.

## **METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES**

Each new revolution or innovation has brought about paradigm shifts in the management and function of public libraries. This was the case with the Gutenberg revolution, the technological revolution, and the emergence of the information society. In the 21st century, these challenges have intensified – particularly in relation to access, comprehension, and validation of information, and the social impact of reading and access to books. Addressing these complexities requires a broader, multidimensional, contextualized, and interdisciplinary perspective.

This study adopts a qualitative methodological approach, which facilitates the exploration of complex social phenomena by integrating the social context with the object of study. The research is both exploratory and descriptive. Exploratory research seeks to develop, clarify, and refine concepts and ideas, thereby contributing to the formulation of more precise research questions. Descriptive research, in turn, aims to characterize the population or phenomenon under investigation in detail, offering a comprehensive understanding of its attributes.

The theoretical foundation of this study was built through bibliographic and documentary research. It draws on the work of key thinkers such as Habermas, Morin, Castells, Lévy, Negroponte, Demo, and Harari. For questions related to books and reading, the writings of Chartier and Manguel were particularly influential. These theoretical contributions were compared and complemented by institutional publications from organizations such as UNESCO, OAS, CERLALC, the Instituto Nacional do Livro, the Biblioteca Nacional, and the Fundação Nacional do Livro Infantil e Juvenil.

Grounded in this theoretical framework, the second phase of the study focused on methodological strategies. Ethnographic research, with an emphasis on observing and analyzing interactive and communicative dynamics, emerged as particularly relevant. In evaluating programs and projects with the aim of proposing viable solutions to identified

challenges, observational and descriptive evidence – core elements of ethnographic inquiry – were prioritized. These were further reinforced through focus group techniques, which allowed for collective reflection and dialogue.

An essential component of the research involved identifying best practices through comparative study techniques. For example, the city of Guadalajara is considered to have one of the highest readership rates, attributed to the strategic efforts of its public library system. In Colombia, the replacement of traditional libraries with *Biblioparques* led to the development of a much more engaged reading public. Today, such experiences can be shared through videoconferencing with the individuals responsible for these transformations – examples that illustrate how public libraries can become visible, inclusive, and central to community life. In this regard, narrative techniques (Brusamolin; Suaiden, 2014) have proven vital to information management and dissemination.

Significant changes are also underway in the very concept of the public library and its integration with the community. New library models increasingly employ market segmentation strategies – adapted here as community segmentation (following Philip Kotler) – which allow libraries to move away from the “everything for everyone” model. Instead, they serve specific community sectors more effectively, for example by offering information services focused on employment and income generation, agribusiness development, reading promotion, or academic exam preparation (such as for the ENEM).

Equally critical are reading mediation techniques, which aim to promote practices of information-based learning. These techniques help students shift from a culture of copying to one of authorship, transitioning from dependent users to active producers of information.

This study also incorporates trend analysis, scenario techniques, and both ROI (Return on Investment) and SROI (Social Return on Investment) methodologies. These tools demonstrate the high social value of investments in public libraries. For instance, in the European Union, over 250,000 individuals find employment each year thanks to public library services. In Australia, every dollar invested in libraries has been shown to generate significant cost savings in the public health system.

## Expected results

Change and new models are pivotal concepts. As Mauricio Antonio Lopes (2024) articulates, we inhabit an era where transformation’s velocity challenges the stability and predictability premises that historically sustained many institutions. Organizations, both public and private, initially designed for stability and continuity, now confront a reality where rigid structures can rapidly impede relevance and effectiveness. Without adaptation, these organizations risk vulnerability and disconnection from the complex, interwoven needs of the 21st century.

The primary expected outcome is significantly enhanced visibility for the public library, both within its community and crucially, in the perception of government bodies. It is

essential that governments recognize the institution not merely as a cultural amenity but as a symbol of job and income generation – in essence, a vital engine for addressing persistent economic and social crises. In developing nations, governments typically allocate budgetary resources to institutions demonstrating clear economic impact through their products and services. Indeed, libraries in several global regions already implement initiatives supporting sectors like agribusiness, thereby stimulating local economies. Furthermore, amid recurring economic crises in many European nations, public libraries have strategically prioritized job and income generation.

User empowerment is another expected outcome, particularly in light of the growing threats of fake news, disinformation, and information manipulation – including plagiarism. The library's role as a space for learning, research, and critical engagement positions it as a key actor in developing an informed, literate, and participatory citizenry. In this context, public libraries must contribute to building a culture of scientific integrity and information ethics, helping to reduce Brazil's scientific and technological dependency and, more broadly, its social inequalities. Navigating the transition from print to digital formats must be led by well-trained information professionals, who are equipped to develop strategies for sustaining and expanding the reading public.

As public libraries gain visibility, they are more likely to attract increased funding and support. With this comes a heightened sense of social responsibility for information professionals. These professionals must adopt qualitative methodologies to demonstrate the social return on investment, both to their communities and to public administrators, reinforcing the essential value of the library in social development.

Information and communication technologies are indispensable to this new model of public library. A diagnostic assessment of the community's social capital should serve as the foundation for designing and adapting library services. Such a diagnostic is just as crucial as the library's physical and digital collections, as it reveals the socioeconomic and educational context of the community and informs targeted interventions – ranging from civic education to university access and employability.

Among the concrete proposals emerging from this project is the recommendation to foster entrepreneurship through partnerships with institutions such as the Serviço Brasileiro de Apoio às Micro e Pequenas Empresas (Sebrae). Such partnerships would enable public libraries to offer professional training, tools, and programs to help citizens integrate into the productive economy.

Public libraries could also incorporate free technical services, such as the Serviço Brasileiro de Respostas Técnicas (SBRT), offered by the Instituto Brasileiro de Informação em Ciência e Tecnologia (IBICT). This service provides high-quality technical responses to help improve products and services, from the simplest to the most complex. Additionally, the integration of Canal Ciência, also developed by IBICT, into public library programming would support science education and expand access to higher education opportunities.

Given the central role of agribusiness in many Brazilian municipalities, partnerships between public libraries and the Empresa Brasileira de Pesquisa Agropecuária (Embrapa) would be particularly valuable. These collaborations could provide access to scientific and technical knowledge critical to enhancing agricultural production, reinforcing the social function of libraries in promoting productive inclusion and combating disinformation.

In the contemporary global context, public libraries must transcend their physical spaces and fully leverage technological tools and global networks. They must engage in comparative librarianship by conducting regular studies on international best practices and emerging innovations. This includes developing services aligned with community social capital; adopting evaluation tools to measure social impact; preparing for future scenarios; supporting users in transitioning from print to digital information; curating scientific knowledge to combat disinformation at all levels; and, ultimately, playing a leading role in advancing open access and democratic information dissemination.

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