



20 Years of Evolution in Public Access

This report is a first version of the Dynamic Coalition on Public Access' main output for 2023, and summarises expert views on how the nature and place of public access in libraries in wider connectivity strategies has evolved since it was first included in the WSIS Plan of Action in December 2003.

The Dynamic Coalition on Public Access is led by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) and Electronic Information for Libraries (EIFL), which together bring together broad membership and experiences of working with and through libraries to change lives for the better

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Introduction

In December 2003, Member States at the Tunis World Summit on the Information Society agreed on a [Plan of Action](#) including the following paragraph:

*10(d): Governments, and other stakeholders, should establish sustainable multi-purpose community public access points, providing affordable or free-of-charge access for their citizens to the various communication resources, notably the Internet. These access points should, to the extent possible, have sufficient capacity to provide assistance to users, in **libraries**, educational institutions, public administrations, post offices or other public places, with special emphasis on rural and underserved areas, while respecting intellectual property rights (IPRs) and encouraging the use of information and sharing of knowledge.*

With this, the plan underlined the importance of creating public access points, which would combine internet access with a variety of other services, and the support to make use of this effectively. Other elements of the Plan of Action make the link between connecting libraries and progress towards wider development agendas (in the case of the WSIS Agenda, the Millennium Development Goals, since superseded by the Sustainable Development Goals), the role of digital libraries in broadening access to knowledge, the place of libraries in building digital skills, and the need in turn to train librarians to realise the potential of digital tools.

We are now almost 20 years on from this first significant inclusion of libraries on the internet governance agenda, and the WSIS+20 review (in 2025) is firmly in view. Around [2/3 of public libraries for which we have data are offering internet access](#), although there is strong variation within countries. We also have [extensive data](#) about the positive impact that public access has had on communities.

Yet inevitably, the question of whether public access still has a place in such a document needs to be asked. Is a focus on public access to the internet in libraries (public access) a relic of the past, or has it maintained its relevance as a broader policy goal by proving responsive and adaptable to changing technological and social conditions?

This publication will turn into a wider collection of viewpoints on the ways in which public access – both in terms of the way it is understood and the way in which it is delivered – has evolved, and how this has impacted on its place within wider efforts to build a people-centred internet.

In this first version, it shares two initial contributions from major players in the internet governance space – the Internet Society and UNESCO – in order to

trigger discussion. However, it will be expanded on the basis of the Dynamic Coalition on Public Access in Libraries session at the 2023 Internet Governance Forum in Kyoto, Japan, and subsequent insights.

Overview

Already, the first two contributions send a strong positive message about the ongoing importance of public access in the wider internet policy mix. Across both of them, there is clear support for the mission of libraries in providing information and knowledge to all as a precondition for development in general. Having such an infrastructure within communities focused on realising the potential of the internet to make positive change happen is as important as ever. Moreover, there is the ongoing role of libraries as places where people can get a first taste of the internet – a taste that may well turn into a readiness to pay for a private connection once its value becomes clear.

More specifically, ideas highlighted include:

- The provision of public access to the internet in libraries **does not compete with 'private' access**, but rather complements it, offering possibilities that may not otherwise be there
- Public access to the internet in libraries is indivisible from their efforts to **address emerging challenges**, such as how to respond to mis- and disinformation online. Libraries have proven to be a key infrastructure both for promoting and providing digital and information literacy.
- Libraries have proven to be adaptable when it comes to **helping new connectivity solutions realise their potential**. They have been at the heart of community networks, as hubs both for internet connections and for the mobilisation of people needed to make these work. They are also adopting Low Earth Orbit access as a means of bringing more people online.
- Public access has proven **responsive to shocks**. The COVID pandemic saw innovative responses around the world, with libraries able to keep people connective, and in particular draw on their own connectivity to support education, employment and more when others were forced to close their doors.
- We are seeing more and more examples of how public access is the **starting point for partnerships** bringing together libraries with other actors in order to develop new services that can make a positive impact for users.
- Beyond internet use itself as mentioned above, libraries have demonstrated their potential as a place where people can **gain a first experience of new technologies**, which they may subsequently go on to adopt personally.

We look forward to adding to this list as more contributions are added.

Fostering Inclusive Knowledge Societies in the AI Era through Public Internet Access in Libraries

Co-contributed by Xiaojie Sun (UNESCO JPO) and Xianhong Hu (UNESCO Programme Specialist)



In the ever-evolving digital landscape, supporting libraries as multifunctional centres for access to reliable information remains crucial.

One of the remarkable changes in public internet access in libraries is its response to the challenges posed by disinformation and misinformation. Recognizing the importance of accurate and authoritative information in the digital age, libraries have curated collections of high-quality resources, reliable books, and open science materials. In this regard, they have become bastions of truth, helping users navigate the sea of information and discern credible sources from misleading ones.

Another significant evolution lies in the [promotion of media and information literacy](#). Libraries have transformed into proactive learning spaces, offering specialized training programs to enhance users' digital literacy skills. These initiatives empower individuals to critically analyze and interpret information, fostering informed decision-making in a rapidly changing world while safeguarding democracy and freedom of expression.

Amidst these changes, certain aspects of public internet access in libraries have remained steadfast. The vision of building knowledge societies, where information is accessible to all, continues to drive their mission.

As home and mobile connectivity continue to expand, the role of public internet access in libraries has adapted to complement rather than compete with these trends. While personal devices offer convenience, libraries remain

crucial in providing inclusive access to information, bridging the digital divide for those without reliable internet access at home.

Public access in libraries has also been intrinsically linked to the achievement of broader sustainable development goals, since libraries act as catalysts for promoting lifelong learning and empowering individuals with skills necessary for economic and social development.

In the pursuit of realizing the full potential of public internet access in libraries, it is imperative to emphasize the role of partnership. A key avenue for achieving this is through a collaborative effort with UNESCO [Information for All Programme \(IFAP\)](#). By joining forces with UNESCO IFAP, libraries can leverage their strengths to tackle emerging challenges in the age of AI and work towards fostering inclusive knowledge societies.

Libraries Provide Resilience and Are Critical to Connecting the Unconnected

Dan York, Director, Internet Technologies at the Internet Society

Long before the Internet was even a spark in someone's imagination, libraries were their own global mechanism distributing information. Today in this Internet age, libraries are even more critical in helping people access information and in helping provide connectivity to those who need it most.



During the recent COVID-19 pandemic as everything shifted online, we saw libraries provide crucial Internet access. Some libraries expanded Wi-Fi access to cover parking lots so that students could work from their cars or outside. Other libraries turned bookmobile vans into roaming hot spots. Around the world, libraries were helping people get access for education, communication, commerce and more.

At the Internet Society our vision is that “the Internet is for everyone” and we spend a great amount of time looking at how we can help connect the unconnected. One area of our work involves helping communities create their own affordable networks to connect to the Internet. [Libraries can play a key role in these community networks](#). Libraries are community-oriented by design and offer both the physical and governance structure that can help a community network be sustainable. They can serve as an actual network hub, or extending the range of networks, or helping people gain the digital skills so that they know what to do once they are online.

On this last point, libraries are often the first places people can learn about the Internet. Libraries can be a tremendous resource to help answer people's questions and build digital literacy. An example we've seen was when [our Armenia Chapter worked with libraries across their country](#) to help their citizens be able to participate online.

Looking ahead, libraries are already exploring how they can provide even better connectivity through space-based Internet access from low Earth orbit (LEO) satellites. The programs of the Gigabit Libraries Network are engaging libraries around the world in exploring how these new systems can be useful.

In a world of uncertainty with climate change and political polarization, libraries will be needed to help provide resilience during connectivity challenges, to help connect the unconnected, and to keep all the information flowing.