

# INFORMATION ACCESS AND SERVICE PROXIMITY IN LIBRARY SYSTEMS: A POLITICAL ECONOMY PERSPECTIVE ON EQUITY AND INCLUSION

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## **Abstract**

Access to information is widely recognised as essential for learning, research, and social participation, yet it remains uneven across communities and institutions. Libraries are expected to reduce these gaps, but their effectiveness depends on more than the availability of resources. Funding patterns, governance structures, infrastructure, staffing, and policy priorities shape how close and usable library services feel to users. This paper examines information access through the concept of service proximity, understood as the extent to which library services are reachable, usable, and relevant in everyday life. Using a political economy perspective, the paper shows how economic and political decisions influence access and equity in library systems. Drawing on selected literature in library and information science, the paper presents a concise framework linking structure, proximity, and access, and highlights practical pathways for improving equity and inclusion. It argues that meaningful access results from sustained investment, careful planning, and attention to user realities rather than from resource provision alone.

**Keywords:** Information access; Service proximity; Library systems; Equity and inclusion; Political economy

## Introduction

Libraries exist to support access to knowledge and information. Across societies, they are trusted to promote learning, research, and social development. In library and information science, access to information is often described as a core professional value. In practice, however, access is uneven. Economic capacity, location, institutional support, and policy choices continue to shape who can use library services and how. Research has consistently shown that access is more than the physical presence of information. Buckland (1991) explains that information becomes meaningful only when users are able to engage with it. Later studies confirm that access is shaped by skills, systems, and social conditions, not collections alone (Wilson, 2016; Jaeger et al., 2021). Users may live close to a library or have online access, yet still experience distance when services are difficult to use or poorly aligned with their needs.

Service proximity helps to explain this gap between availability and use. Proximity goes beyond physical distance to include digital access, staff support, and relevance to everyday life. Digital services have expanded library reach, but they have also introduced new barriers where connectivity, devices, and skills are uneven (Sin et al., 2021). These patterns point to the need for a broader explanation of access, one that considers the political and economic conditions shaping library systems. This paper adopts a political economy perspective to examine how structural factors influence service proximity and, in turn, information access. Rather than presenting new empirical data, it offers a focused conceptual discussion grounded in relevant literature.

## Conceptual Foundations

### *Information Access in Practice*

Early library practice often treated access as achieved once materials were acquired and organised. This view has proven inadequate. Information has value only when users can understand and apply it in meaningful ways. Studies of information behaviour show that confidence, time, institutional culture, and social context shape access (Wilson, 2016). Libraries may therefore be present, yet underused, when systems feel complex or unwelcoming.

Recent scholarship links access to broader questions of inequality and participation. Jaeger et al. (2021) argue that limited access to information restricts educational, economic, and civic opportunities. Libraries play an important role in addressing these gaps, but their capacity depends on the support they receive within larger systems.

### **Service Proximity**

Service proximity is often reduced to physical closeness, but this alone does not explain user experience. A nearby library can still feel distant if opening hours are limited, digital platforms are unreliable, or staff support is insufficient (Gibson et al., 2017). Proximity also includes digital and relational dimensions. Digital services have reshaped how proximity is experienced, especially in academic libraries. Online resources can reduce distance, but only where users have reliable internet access and sufficient skills. Where these conditions are weak, digital proximity remains limited (van Dijk, 2020).

## **Political Economy Perspective**

Political economy focuses on how resources are distributed and how institutional priorities are set. Applied to libraries, it highlights the influence of funding, governance, and policy decisions on service delivery (Mosco, 2009). Libraries reflect broader social values about public investment and responsibility. Well-funded institutions are more likely to offer stable and responsive services, while under-resourced libraries struggle to maintain both physical and digital access. These differences are the outcome of long-term patterns of investment and governance rather than chance (Buschman, 2017).

## **Structural Factors Shaping Access and Proximity**

### ***Funding and Resources***

Funding strongly shapes library services. Stable funding supports staffing, collections, infrastructure, and innovation. In contrast, weak or unpredictable funding leads to reduced hours, limited services, and fragile digital systems. In academic libraries, rising costs of electronic resources have widened access gaps between institutions (Fyfe et al., 2017).

### ***Infrastructure and Technology***

Physical and digital infrastructure influence how welcoming and usable libraries are. Poorly maintained spaces and unreliable technology discourage use. Digital services now depend on stable connectivity and adequate bandwidth, which remain uneven across regions (van Dijk, 2020).

### ***Governance and Staffing***

Policies and governance frameworks shape service priorities and resource allocation. Centralised decisions may overlook local needs, while limited staffing reduces user support and engagement. Users' perceptions of access are closely linked to staff availability and interaction quality (Gibson et al., 2017).

### **Implications for Policy and Planning**

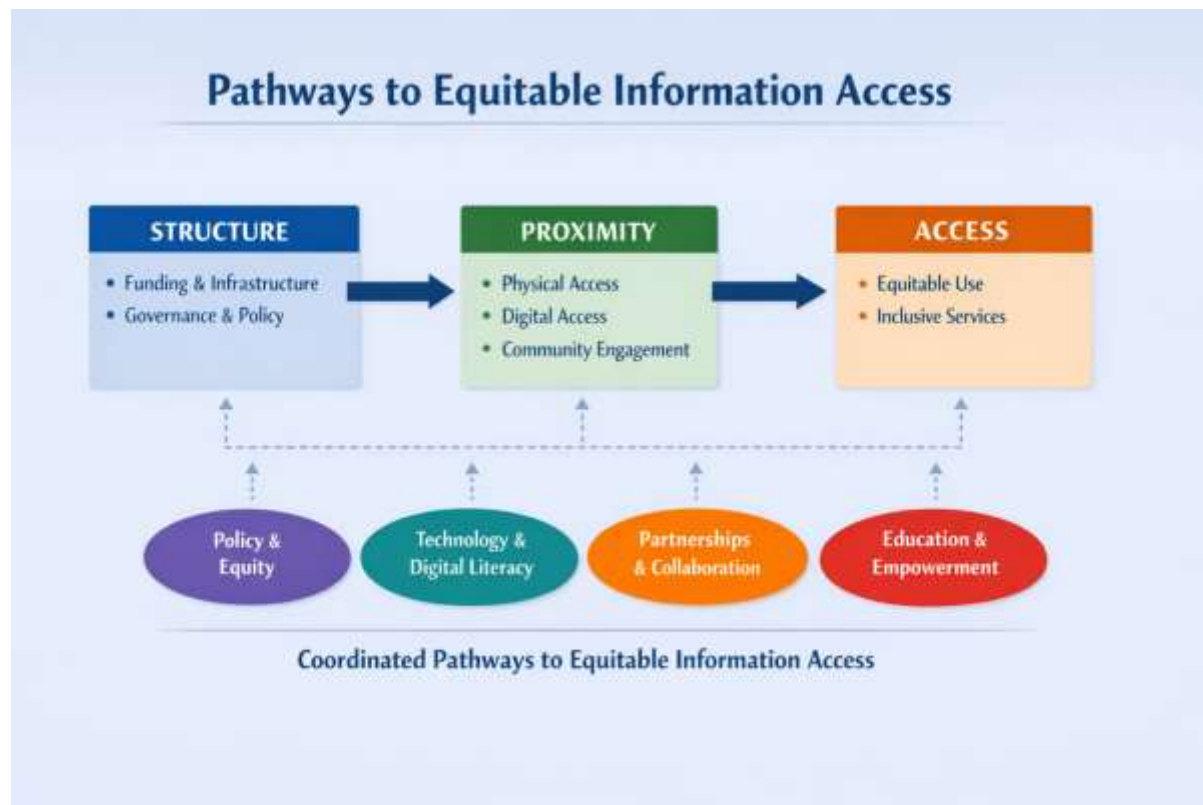
Understanding access as a structurally shaped outcome shifts responsibility beyond frontline staff. Policy decisions about funding, infrastructure, and governance define what libraries can realistically achieve. Strategic planning that treats service proximity as a core concern places emphasis on user experience rather than outputs alone. Equity-focused planning recognises that uniform service models often reinforce inequality. Targeted investment, flexible service delivery, and partnerships with education and community organisations can help bring services closer to underserved groups (Mehra et al., 2006).

### **Pathways to Equitable Information Access**

Equitable access develops when structural investment, service design, and user support are aligned. Long-term funding provides the foundation, while service proximity ensures that resources are usable and relevant. Digital tools can extend reach when combined with training and support (Jaeger et al., 2021). Collaboration with schools, community groups, and other agencies helps libraries overcome structural limits.

Information and digital literacy programmes further enable users to make effective use of available services.

**Figure 1:** Conceptual Pathway Linking Structure, Service Proximity, and Information Access



*Source: Author's conceptualisation.*

**Figure 1:** illustrates the conceptual pathway through which information access is produced within library systems. The model shows that access is shaped first by structural conditions, including funding, governance, infrastructure, and staffing. These conditions determine the level of service proximity experienced by users, whether physical, digital, or relational. Service proximity acts as the connecting layer between institutional structure

and user experience, influencing how reachable, usable, and relevant library services are in everyday life. Information access therefore emerges as an outcome of this interaction rather than as a direct result of resource availability alone. The pathway highlights that equitable access depends on sustained structural support translated into services that users can realistically engage with.

### **Recommendations**

The analysis in this paper points to several practical steps for improving information access through stronger service proximity in library systems. Libraries and funding bodies should prioritise stable, long-term investment in staffing, infrastructure, and digital systems. These elements are not optional additions but core foundations that determine whether access is reliable and meaningful. Service proximity should be treated as a central concern in strategic planning. Decisions about service locations, opening hours, digital platforms, and staff support should be guided by how easily users can integrate library services into their daily activities.

Equity-focused policies should move beyond uniform service provision and adopt needs-based resource allocation. Greater attention should be given to underserved communities and institutions where structural barriers to access remain high.

Digital initiatives should be supported by training, technical assistance, and inclusive design. Without these supports, online services risk reproducing distance rather than reducing it.

Libraries should also strengthen partnerships with educational institutions, community organisations, and social agencies. Such collaborations can extend service reach and embed information access within broader support networks.

Finally, policymakers and library leaders should consistently recognise libraries as social institutions with responsibilities for inclusion and participation. Strategic decisions should clearly link structural support to user experience and access outcomes.

### **Conclusion**

This study has shown that information access in library systems cannot be separated from the conditions under which libraries operate. Earlier sections demonstrated how funding, infrastructure, governance, and staffing shape service proximity, and how proximity, in turn, determines whether access is experienced as meaningful or merely symbolic. These insights reinforce the central argument of the paper: access is not produced by resources alone, but by the way structural support is translated into services that users can realistically reach and use.

The discussion highlighted service proximity as the connecting link between structure and access. Where libraries are adequately funded, well governed, and professionally staffed, services tend to feel closer, more dependable, and more responsive. Where structural support is weak, libraries may exist physically or digitally yet remain distant in practice. Differences in access outcomes therefore reflect political and economic decisions rather than local effort alone.

By applying a political economy perspective, the paper clarifies that inequalities in information access are not accidental. They emerge from long-standing patterns of investment, policy priorities, and institutional power. When structural investment, service design, and user support are aligned, access shifts from a formal promise to a lived experience and improving information access requires sustained attention to the structures that shape library systems. Libraries remain central to knowledge equity, but their ability to fulfil this role depends on consistent policy commitment and deliberate investment that brings services closer to the realities of users' lives.

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