LibrarIN

NEXT GENERATION LIBRARIES:

Bottom-Up, People-First and Purpose-Driven

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Landscape

Libraries are vital pillars of democratic societies with an important role in fostering an informed and engaged community. As underlined in the 2025 LibrarIN High-Level Policy Roundtable, libraries stand at the frontline of Europe's cultural battle for democracy, facing the dual challenge of misinformation and societal fragmentation.[1] The urgency of this mission is underscored by recent data from international surveys from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which reveal critical gaps in the public's ability to distinguish fact from opinion and a general decline in adult competencies over time.[2]

As essential public service providers, libraries are well placed to contribute to tackling pressing societal challenges through social innovation and collaboration. In fact, the 2023 update of the Council of Europe's guidelines on library legislation and policy in Europe, emphasises the vital role of libraries in supporting democratic participation.[3] Libraries today are expected to fulfill multiple, sometimes overlapping roles — democratic, cultural, educational, social, innovative, and increasingly green. The European Union Work Plan for Culture 2023–2026, identifies strengthening the multiple roles of libraries as a priority with its special work group on "Building bridges: strengthening the multiple roles of libraries as gateways to and transmitters of cultural works, skills, and European values."[4] However, while libraries are under increasing pressure to adapt to the fast-changing needs of their communities, and to take on multiple roles (educational, democratic, cultural) a traditional top-down service design is no longer sufficient.

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[1] Policy Roundtable on "Next Generation Libraries: Bottom-Up, People-First and Purpose-Driven": https://lisboncouncil.net/newsandevents/turning-the-page-co-creating-people-first-european-libraries/

[2] Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) Survey: https://www.oecd.org/en/about/programmes/pisa.html.

Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC): https://www.oecd.org/en/about/programmes/piaac.html .

[3] Recommendation CM/Rec(2023)3 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on library legislation and policy in Europe: https://rm.coe.int/0900001680aaced6.

Libraries for a sustainable future - Manifesto for the 2024 EU Elections https://repository.ifla.org/items/82d05b16-87d7-4d1a-baa3-73309f147314

[4] Council of the European Union, "Open Method of Coordination (OMC) Group of Member States' Experts on Building Bridges:

Strengthen the Multiple Roles of Libraries as Gateways to and Transmitters of Cultural Works, Skills and European Values – Approved Mandate," 2023,

https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14250-2023-INIT/en/pdf.

Council of the European Union, "Council Resolution on the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023–2026," 2022,

https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal- content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022G1207(01).

European Commission, "A Culture Compass for Europe," n.d.,

https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/14609-A-Culture-Compass-for-Europe_en.

The LibrarIN literature review shows that collaboration is one of the most important innovation strategies for libraries in the 21st century.[5] Collaboration is about working collectively with a group of organisations, stakeholders or users and is a "strategic choice" to improve the quality and efficiency of services.[6]

Co-creation is a more interactive type of collaboration. Its use in the development of library service innovations substantially improves the usefulness of knowledge obtained from library users and other stakeholders for developing service innovations. **Unfortunately, co-creation with library users is only used for 24.3% of high-priority library innovations and is likely to be used less frequently for less important innovations**, as the analyses from the LibrarIN large scale survey show (section 2).

In line with the EU's priority for "**A new push for European democracy**", national policies are transforming libraries into crucial hubs for civic life. A significant majority of countries now have policies that actively promote libraries as spaces for public dialogue and democratic engagement. A strong focus is placed on inclusivity, with most national frameworks identifying libraries as safe and welcoming environments for minority groups. [7]

Reflecting the EU priority of "**Promoting our European way of life**," national library policies overwhelmingly encourage strategic partnerships with cultural, artistic, and educational organizations to build a more inclusive society. However, **a clear gap exists between European ambitions and national policy when it comes to actively supporting co-creation and the direct involvement of users in designing and innovating library services**. A closer look at various countries reveals this support is inconsistent. While some national frameworks endorse co-creation, others see these practices emerge from local, grassroots initiatives without formal top-down strategy, and a few overlook the concept entirely in their plans.

Although European and national policies increasingly recognise libraries as vital democratic, cultural, and civic hubs, there is a persistent gap between ambition and practice. Evidence from the LibrarIN large scale survey (section 2) shows that co-creation with users and stakeholders significantly improves the effectiveness of library innovations, yet it is rarely applied. Only about a quarter of high- priority innovations in public libraries and a similar share in academic libraries involve users directly. This underuse is driven by structural barriers such as limited innovation skills, uneven access to dedicated funding, and disparities between small and large libraries. **Without stronger and more consistent policy support and raising awareness for co-creation, skills development, and sustainable funding, libraries will struggle to realise their full potential as bottom-up, people-first, and purpose- driven institutions.**

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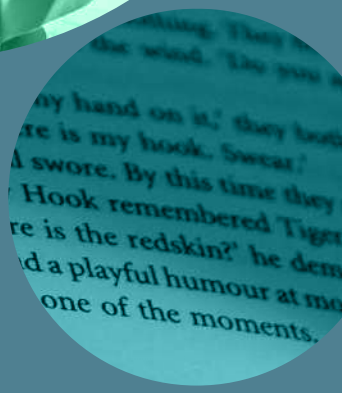
[5] Luis Rubalcaba, Paul Windrum, Ernesto Solano, Kirsi Hyytinen, Tiina Tuominen, Sari Vainikainen, and Varun Gupta, "D2.1 Conceptual Framework and Model of Participatory Management and Sustainable Growth v1.0," LibrarIN, 2023.

[6] Brian Lavoie, "Library Collaboration as a Strategic Choice: Evaluating Options for Acquiring Capacity," OCLC Research, Dublin Ohio, 2022, https://doi.org/10.25333/mt16-0c57.

[7] LibrarIN Library Policy Tracker, accessed October 8, 2025. For more information, visit https://librarin.eu/toolkit/library-policy-tracker/.



2. /Quantitative Evidence from European Libraries: Obstacles and Support Factors for a "People-First" Approach

Libraries are increasingly recognised as vital public service providers, but questions remain about how they innovate and whether they involve their communities in the process. Evidence from the LibrarIN project sheds light on this. Drawing on a large-scale survey of European libraries, the project examines how often co-creation is used, what enables or hinders it, and what knowledge libraries gain from collaboration.

LibrarIN surveyed European libraries on their innovation activities over the previous three years, with results on co-creation for up to 586 main public and 315 academic libraries. The unit of analysis for co-creation is a single innovation, usually a service or combined service-process. For public libraries, respondents selected an innovation "of high priority to your library or of high expected value to your library users". University library respondents selected an innovation "of high priority to your library or required substantial effort to develop and implement".

Though the definitions differ, both surveys asked for examples of very important innovations for which co-creation would be more likely to be used than for other types of innovations. Many of the survey questions are limited to the single 'focal' innovation, while other questions on skills, obstacles and drivers are relevant to all innovations. Three clear findings emerge:

1. **the prevalence of co-creation,**
2. **factors that hinder or support co-creation,**
3. **factors associated with obtaining useful knowledge from which key stakeholders.**

The analyses detailed in the next sections find that policies to transform libraries into the next generation of bottom-up, people-first institutions will substantially benefit from the use of co-creation methods to develop and implement new or improved process and service innovations.

2.1 How frequently is co-creation used to develop library innovations?

LibrarIN survey data show that co-creation in European libraries is still relatively rare, especially when it comes to involving end users. Co-creation most often involves non-managerial staff, largely because they are readily available to take part in innovation activities (see table 1). Library users are only involved in co-creation for 24% of the surveyed public libraries, while non-profits and businesses are used less frequently.

University libraries report higher overall user involvement (52.4%), but this is mostly due to the involvement of faculty or researchers, with only 24.8% of students involved. The high rate of co- creation with faculty or researchers is probably due to their availability and high interest in library innovations that affect them.

TABLE 1. Percent public and academic libraries that used co-creation methods to involve different groups in developing key innovations

	Public	University
Number of libraries[1]	586	315
Library non-managerial staff	54%	64%
Library users	24%	52%
Faculty or researchers as library users	-	46%
Students as library users	-	25%
Non-profits	18%	-
Businesses	15%	-

1: Number of respondents that answered the relevant questions.

Public libraries that are the only library serving a municipality or region (stand-alone libraries) are much less likely to co-create with users (13.5%) than those linked to other libraries (29.3%). This is partly because stand-alone libraries are smaller and have fewer employees.
For universities, the number of employees has no effect on the use of co-creation.
While staff participation is common, the groups that stand to benefit most (users, students, and community partners) are still rarely engaged.

2.2 *Identifying support factors and obstacles to co-creation*

The LibrarIN survey identifies factors that either support or constrain co-creation. Barriers to innovation completely stop an innovation project, while obstacles merely slow it down by increasing costs or causing delays. In libraries, barriers to innovation are rare.
Only a small percentage of the surveyed libraries did not innovate in the previous three years: (6% of public and 2% of university libraries).
Because so few libraries fall into the non-innovating group, it is not possible to analyse the factors influencing their decision to not to innovate. Instead, this study focuses on the factors that support innovation and the obstacles to using co-creation methods to innovate.

2.2.1 *Public libraries*

In public libraries, support factors outweigh obstacles. Individual barriers tend to have little impact on the use of co-creation, likely because library managers can work around them, as observed in both public and private sectors (Este et al., 2012; Torugsa & Arundel, 2016).[8]
What really matters is when several obstacles come together—like a lack of resources combined with limited government support (see Table 2). Co-creation can also be hindered by weak connections between libraries, an issue especially prevalent in smaller, stand-alone institutions in rural areas, and by the digital nature of an innovation.

[8] Pablo D'Este, Simona Iammarino, Maria Savona, and Nick Von Tunzelmann, "What Hampers Innovation? Revealed Barriers Versus Deterring Barriers," Research Policy, Vol. 41, No. 2, 2012, pp. 482-488.
Nassim Torugsa and Anthony Arundel, "Complexity of Innovation in the Public Sector: A Workgroup-Level Analysis of Related Factors and Outcomes," Public Management Review, Vol. 18, No. 3, 2016, pp. 392-416.

TABLE 2: Factors that support or hinder the use of co-creation with four groups, LibrarIN survey of main public libraries[1]

	Library users	Library non-management staff	Non profits	Business
Hinder (obstacles)				
Stand-alone library	×	×		×
Number of 'high importance' obstacles[2]	×	×		
Digital characteristics	×			×
Support factors				
Number of innovation/technical skills	✓	✓		✓
New media/technology as a driver		✓	✓	
External dedicated funding	✓		✓	✓
Innovation experience	✓			✓

1: Results from separate logistic regressions for each group

2: Obstacles are only significant if the variable for the number of skills is excluded.

Factors that support co-creation in public libraries are four:

1. staff skills for innovation (change or innovation management, design thinking capabilities, digital literacy, information technology skills, and AI skills),
2. new media or technologies as adriver of innovation,
3. dedicated external funding,
4. previous experience with diverse innovation types.

Among these, staff skills and dedicated funding are the most important support factors, as co-creation is costly in terms of employee time. A diversity of innovation experience increases the probability of nvolving library users and businesses in co-creation, perhaps by giving managers experience with co- creation or with working around obstacles.

In short, building staff skills, securing dedicated funding, and drawing on past innovation experience are the most effective ways to strengthen co-creation in public libraries.

2.2.2 *University libraries*

Compared to public libraries, university libraries present a more complex picture of co-creation. The LibrarIN survey was conducted among university libraries that are members of the European Association of Research Libraries (LIBER), and non-LIBER members. Their diversity, from large research-focused LIBER members to smaller non-LIBER institutions, means that the factors supporting or hindering co-creation vary significantly. Understanding these differences is crucial, since universities are both hubs of knowledge production and important service providers for students, researchers, and staff. Table 3 provides results for all research libraries, both LIBER libraries and non- LIBER libraries.

Only two obstacles have a negative effect on co-creation (staff resistance to change and university regulations). In addition, the number of high importance obstacles reduces co-creation with non- management staff in non-LIBER libraries. Evaluating good practices of other libraries is also negative. A plausible reason is that evaluation increases knowledge about the innovation, thereby reducing the need for co-creation.

Two obstacles are found to reduce co-creation in research libraries overall, while in non-LIBER libraries the combined effect of major obstacles lowers co-creation with non-management staff (Table 3). Another unexpected finding is that evaluating the good practices of other libraries also has a negative effect—possibly because this evaluation provides managers with enough knowledge about an innovation that co-creation feels less necessary.

The separate results for LIBER and non-LIBER university libraries identify support factors for individual skills (design thinking, digital literacy, and AI skills) and idea sources (other libraries and users) that were not visible when all university libraries are combined. Skills appear to be the most important factor, either as the sum of skills or individually, and support the involvement of non-managerial staff, faculty and students in co-creation activities. Ideas from library users is an important support factor for co-creation for all three groups for non-LIBER libraries whereas LIBER libraries that draw on ideas from other libraries are more likely to involve non-management staff and faculty in co-creation.

Table 3: Factors that support or reduce the use of co-creation with three groups, LibrarIN survey of university libraries1

	Library non-management staff	Faculty as library users	Students as library users
Hinder (obstacles)			
Library staff resist change obstacle	×		
University regulations obstacle			†
Sum of high importance obstacles	‡		
Evaluate good practices in other libraries	×		
Support factors			
Connection intensity			✓†
Staff motivation for innovation		†	
Sum of five skills to support innovation	✓	✓‡	
Change management skills			‡
Design thinking skills	†‡	†	
Digital literacy skills	‡		
AI skills	‡		‡
Sufficient financial resources	✓†		†
External funding	‡		
User needs/experiences as a driver			✓
New media/technology as a driver		✓	
New university policies as a driver	‡		
Technical intensity of the innovation		✓	‡
Idea for the innovation from other libraries	†	†	
Idea for the innovation from library users	‡	‡	‡ †

1: Tick mark or x = all libraries, dagger (†) = LIBER libraries only, double plus (‡) = non-LIBER libraries only.

Overall, the findings show that skills and idea sources are decisive factors in enabling co-creation within university libraries, while obstacles such as regulatory constraints or resistance to change can dampen its use. Larger, research-intensive libraries often benefit from stronger institutional support and established networks, whereas smaller ones rely more heavily on drawing ideas directly from users. This highlights the need for targeted strategies: strengthening innovation skills and systematically valuing user input can help ensure that co-creation in university libraries is not limited to well-resourced institutions but becomes a more consistent practice across the sector.

2.2.3 The innovation skills gap

A major barrier to wider use of co-creation is the lack of innovation-related skills among library staff. Having multiple in-house skills to support innovation or the use of technology strongly supports co-creation in both public and university libraries. While their absence hinders libraries' ability to adopt best practices and new technologies.

About a quarter of the libraries (table 4) report no staff with any of the high-level skills relevant to innovation (26% of public libraries and 28% of university libraries). **The skills gap is largest in smaller institutions, which could reduce their ability to innovate**. For example: skills in design thinking and artificial intelligence (AI) are far less common in smaller libraries compared to their larger counterparts. As shown in Table 4, only 13% of the small university libraries report having staff with AI skills, compared to 29% of the large ones. A similar gap by size exists in public libraries (19% vs. 32). A surprising result for which we lack an explanation, is that many of these skills are more prevalent in public than in university libraries, except for AI. **In sum, smaller libraries are at a particular disadvantage in developing innovation skills.**

Table 4: Prevalence of skills of relevance to innovation, percent for small, large, and all public and university libraries

	Public libraries			University libraries		
	Number of employees		All	Number of employees		All
	< 50	+50		< 50	+50	
Number of libraries	525	108	633	140	171	311
Change or innovation management	33%	64%	38%	19%	30%	25%
Design thinking or other methods of involving library users in developing library services	28%	55%	33%	21%	36%	29%
Digital literacy (knowing which digital technology to use to solve a problem)	55%	89%	61%	32%	59%	47%
Information technology (data science, data security, automation, etc.)	-	-	-	44%	68%	58%
Artificial intelligence[1]	19%	32%	21%	13%	29%	22%
No staff with any of the above skills	31%	4%	26%	41%	17%	28%

1: (natural language processing, large language models, optical character or handwritten text recognition, etc.).
The columns do not sum to 100% as respondents can tick more than 1 skill.

2.2.4 *The funding gap*

Funding also plays a critical role in shaping whether libraries can invest in co-creation and innovation. Libraries fund most activities through core budgets, but a dedicated innovation budget is a major support factor for co-innovation in public libraries and for non-LIBER university libraries. Public libraries rely more heavily on special government funding programs. Universities are more likely to access external grants. Collaborative innovation projects that involve multiple stakeholders are the most successful at attracting funding from other sources, with 50% receiving external funding (collaboration results not shown in Table 5).

Table 5: Prevalence of public and university libraries reporting different funding by library size

	Public libraries			University libraries		
	Number of employees		All	Number of employees		All
	< 50	+50		< 50	+50	
Number of libraries	478	105	583	140	161	301
From library budget	74%	75%	74%	48%	59%	54%
Special government funding (municipal, regional, national, EU in addition to the annual library budget)	41%	54%	44%	-	-	-
Funding from other sources[1]	7%	15%	9%	22%	33%	28%

1: For public libraries the question is "from other sources (philanthropists, crowdfunding, etc."
"For universities the question is "external funding (government, philanthropists, crowdfunding etc.)".

Large libraries are more successful than smaller libraries at securing innovation funding from non- library sources. Smaller libraries also suffer from a lack of innovation skills. This disparity reduces their ability to collaborate on innovation projects and ultimately results in fewer novel services, particularly for smaller communities. Libraries that cite insufficient funding as a major obstacle are more likely to resort to simple adoption of existing services, which requires fewer resources but is also the least transformative.

Without dedicated innovation funding, smaller libraries risk being limited to incremental changes rather than transformative, co-created services.

2.3 Obtaining useful knowledge from stakeholders for innovation

The central purpose of co-creation is to obtain useful knowledge for innovation. Without it, there is no point in including users and stakeholders in costly co-creation activities.
Survey respondents were asked to rate the usefulness of knowledge obtained, through any means, from users and other stakeholders (tables 6 and 7). For public libraries, non-managerial library staff are the most frequent source of knowledge used to develop public library service innovations and the largest source of 'very useful' knowledge. Their hands-on expertise, operational insights, and close interaction with users make them especially valuable.

Co-creation increases the share of respondents citing knowledge from non-management staff as "very useful" from 30% to 52%. For library users, the relative increase in the benefits from co-creation is greater, with the share obtaining "very useful" knowledge increasing from 17% when co-creation is not used to 49% when co-creation is used. Businesses are an exception, with the share of "very useful" knowledge declining when businesses are involved in co-creation activities. However, this negative effect disappears in a regression analysis that controls for multiple factors.

Table 6: Percent public libraries reporting that knowledge from each source (with and without co-creation) was 'very useful'

	N[1]	No co-creation	With co-creation
Library non-management staff	527	30%	52%
Library users	382	17%	49%
Non-profits	225	32%	56%
Businesses	183	47%	40%

1: The number of cases varies because the analysis is limited to respondent who obtained some knowledge from each group.

Similar patterns hold for university libraries (see Table 7). Non-management library staff are the most frequent source of "very useful" knowledge, with or without co-creation. For each group, co-creation substantially results in much more very useful knowledge for everyone involved.

Table 7: Percent university libraries reporting that knowledge from each source (with and without co-creation) was 'very useful'

	N[1]	No co-creation	With co-creation
Library non-management staff	287	46%	77%
Faculty/researchers	261	30%	68%
Students	209	25%	60%

1: The number of cases varies because the analysis is limited to respondents who obtained some knowledge from each group.

Regression analysis for main public libraries supports the results in Table 6, finding that co-creation has a substantial beneficial effect on the usefulness of knowledge obtained for the development of library innovations from all four groups, including businesses. Co-creation is also far more effective in increasing the usefulness of knowledge from each group than other factors. For example, the presence of user ideas as a driver to innovate increases the probability of being in the highest usefulness category (very useful) for users by 3.8 percentage points, while co-creation with users increases the probability by a substantial 25.4 percentage points.

Given the strong beneficial effects of co-creation on the usefulness of knowledge for innovation obtained from several sources, the low uptake of co-creation with users and other external stakeholders is of concern. Whatever the cause, the survey results point to a strong policy case to support the greater use of co-creation as a method for obtaining useful knowledge for developing library service innovations, not only from users and non-management staff, but also from other stakeholders such as non-profits and businesses.

3./Qualitative Case Study Evidence Co-Creation in Practice

While survey data identifies the general factors that support and hinder co-creation, qualitative evidence from in-depth case studies provides deeper insights into its successful implementation. These studies examined libraries acting as "living labs" and explored their role in fostering social entrepreneurship, public-private networks, and social innovation. The cases reveal that libraries can successfully drive innovation by embracing a new role centred on collaborative user value creation.

3.1 *Living Lab as a New Model for Library Service*

Living lab is a concept of innovation that emphasizes a generative and experimental approach to innovation processes by engaging multiple personnel groups, stakeholders and end-users in an explorative setting for the benefit of individuals and society.
The 16 libraries in the "living lab" case studies all navigate a dual need: they must **operate within their traditional mandate to support education, culture, and democracy,**
while **also conceptualising their offerings as engaging services designed with and for their users**. This shift requires a greater focus on creating value for the user by engaging in ongoing dialogue and co-creating new services with citizens and other stakeholders. The analysis of these successful "living lab" models reveals two key characteristics:

Balanced Leadership: Successful co-creation is characterized by a leadership style that balances bottom-up and top-down approaches. These libraries actively listen to users and encourage grassroots innovation. At the same time, their leadership is prepared to intervene or halt initiatives that fall outside the library's core mission, ensuring that innovation remains aligned with institutional goals. The LibrarIN policy roundtable highlighted that for co-creation to be effective, leadership must consciously address power dynamics to ensure the process is about genuine empowerment, not simply idea extraction.

Emphasis on Relational Competencies: A second critical characteristic is the development of staff skills beyond traditional professional competencies. While technical competencies like AI and digital literacy are vital, the case study and LibrarIN policy roundtable insights show these must be paired with well- developed relational skills—such as facilitation and empathetic engagement—to successfully translate innovative ideas into community value. The case studies show that staff in innovative libraries are equipped with strong relational skills that enable them to better understand and respond to user needs. Staff are trained to facilitate user-led activities while also recognising when to set boundaries, supported by internal procedures that empower them to manage collaborations effectively. These skills are likely to be more important than the technical skills covered in the survey.

The central role of library staff is also supported by the survey results for the high usefulness of knowledge obtained from co-creation with non-managerial staff. Examples raised during the 2025 Roundtable include world cafés on democracy, repair cafés inside libraries, and participatory design of library spaces such as Oodi in Helsinki or Dokk1 in Aarhus.
These illustrate how co-creation transforms users into co-owners of library spaces and services.

3.2 *Social entrepreneurship, public-private networks and social innovation*

The LibrarIN case studies on social entrepreneurship document the fact that public libraries' value offering **shifts from a logic of provision**, in which the librarian mobilizes a set of technical capabilities (e.g. The manipulation of classification systems), **to a logic of intervention, where the library user explicitly requests the librarian to respond to specific community issues** (e.g. social isolation, or planned obsolescence of durable goods). In this new logic, the librarian mobilises firstly human capabilities (e.g. Listening and empathy) and **the library becomes a socialising space, where books are not necessarily at the centre of the service relation**.
In practice, this shift from service provision to community intervention can take many forms: from participatory projects where users become "co-owners" by building furniture for the library, to "world cafes" that facilitate democratic dialogue, or even the co-development of educational games.

In this new logic of intervention, innovations undertaken by libraries should be considered as social innovations in that they often involve a network of partners on the provision side, and because they aim at creating a network of interactions among the beneficiaries. For instance, the creation of a repair-café inside a library, or the hosting of a human-books event, necessitate the establishment of a partnership between the librarian and a variety of non-library actors, like volunteer repairers, or individuals willing to share stories about their life experience. When the new service is delivered, new kinds of discussions and interactions emerge among the beneficiaries, as well as between them and the service providers. The LibrarIN policy roundtable highlighted examples of community co-design, such as the Oodi and Dokk1 libraries, which illustrate how co-creation can transform users into **co-owners of their library's spaces and services**.

The fact that public libraries are social innovators is important for policy makers in two ways: libraries become a central actor of a country's innovativeness, and they also become a guarantor of social cohesion.

First, regarding innovation policy, Nonaka (1994)[9] theorized that innovations result from a more abstract process of knowledge creation. This process is initiated by a phase of socialisation in which people exchange tacit knowledge in the form of know-how or know-who (Lundvall and Johnson[10]) followed by an articulation phase in which the tacit knowledge is codified, for instance in the form of books. From this perspective, while the traditional books-providing library was as a useful supporting agent, in that it facilitated the circulation of material supports of explicit knowledge, the social innovative library becomes able to initiate new processes of knowledge creation by favouring socialisation among actors with a problem-solving mindset. As an illustration of this, the case studies assembled in LibrarIN demonstrate that one social innovation can produce many others by ricochet.

Secondly, public libraries are turning into third places, that is places of discussion between strangers, who can abstract from their professional status (Oldenburg and Brisset, 1982)[11]. This kind of "pure sociability" (p. 270) allows individuals to access serendipitous knowledge, which helps nurture a society of public opinion. Speakers at the Policy Roundtable also highlighted libraries' role in reducing loneliness and creating trusted spaces for dialogue—even when debates are uncomfortable— reinforcing their democratic purpose.[12] The multiplication of that kind of third space becomes a necessity to counteract the activity of recommendation systems in online social media, as they foster the disaggregation of the society into hubs of preconceived opinions, therefore endangering public debate (Desmarchelier et al., 2025)[13].

Speakers at the 2025 Roundtable also highlighted libraries' role in reducing loneliness and creating trusted spaces for dialogue—even when debates are uncomfortable—reinforcing their democratic purpose.[14]

In sum, public libraries are not only useful for producing innovation, but also for maintaining and nurturing a society of public debate. As such, the decline in the number of public libraries, as well as in their number of users (Weaver and Appleton, 2020) is a matter of worry that should be addressed energetically by political leaders.

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[9] Ikujiro Nonaka, "A Dynamic Theory of Organizational Knowledge Creation," Organization Science, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1994, pp. 14-37.

[10] Bengt-Åke Lundvall and Björn Johnson, "The Learning Economy," Journal of Industry Studies, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1994, pp. 23-42.

[11] Ray Oldenburg and Dennis Brissett, "The Third Place," Qualitative Sociology, Vol. 5, No. 4, 1982, pp. 265–284.

[12] The Lisbon Council, "Policy Roundtable on 'Next Generation Libraries: Bottom-Up, People-First and Purpose-Driven'," 2025, https://lisboncouncil.net/newsandevents/turning-the-page-co-creating-people-first-european-libraries/.

[13] Benoît Desmarchelier, Faïz Djellal, and Faouzi Gallouj, "Filter Bubbles as a Vector of Tradition? Decoding Opinion Dynamics with Agent-Based Modelling," Journal of Computational Social Science, 2025,

[14] The Lisbon Council, "Policy Roundtable on 'Next Generation Libraries: Bottom-Up, People-First and Purpose-Driven'," 2025, https://lisboncouncil.net/newsandevents/turning-the-page-co-creating-people-first-european-libraries/.

4 /Actionable Recommendations: Building the Next Generation of Libraries

Recommendations

To empower libraries on the frontline of Europe's cultural battle for democracy, the following recommendations outline how policy and practice can tackle the systemic barriers—limited co-creation, skills gaps, and resource constraints — and transform libraries into truly bottom-up, people- first institutions.

1

Raise awareness of the value of co-creation

Co-creation substantially increases the usefulness of knowledge obtained from different groups for developing an innovation. The low rates of co-creation with library users and other stakeholders (non- profits, businesses) in public libraries and with students in university libraries suggests that library managers are either unaware or not convinced of the value of co-creation. The first recommendation is therefore to raise awareness of the value of co-creation with library users and other stakeholders, particularly in public libraries.

2

Focus on supporting "success"factors

Obstacles matter in reducing the use of co-creation, but factors that support co-creation are substantially more valuable. Specific obstacles are rarely of concern -managers can work around them. In public libraries, the challenge arises when multiple obstacles occur simultaneously, reducing managers' ability to apply co-creation methods effectively. For university libraries obstacles have less of an impact. Support factors are usually the opposite of obstacles, for example a lack of skills becomes the availability of skills. This is one reason why it is more effective for policy to stress support factors rather than fixate on obstacles.

3

Address Systemic Resource Constraints

To improve innovation and interactive user involvement through co-creation, policy must focus on support that addresses the root cause: resource scarcity. For both public and university libraries, the most effective way to foster co-creation and other best practices is to support the development of in- library skills of relevance to innovation and provide adequate funding to cover the costs of co- creation and collaborative innovation. Efforts to encourage user involvement will have limited impact if staff do not have the time or resources to implement new ideas.

4

Invest in a Modern Skills Agenda

Libraries need access to a modern skill set that supports best practices in developing innovations, from co-creation to digital transformation. Training and recruitment must focus on a diversity of competencies. This includes a diversity of technical skills including AI, data science, and digital literacy as well as methodological skills such as change management and design thinking. A diverse skill set supports experience with a broad variety of innovation types, which in turn supports co-creation activities. Crucially, these must be paired with relational competencies that enable staff to better understand and respond to user needs, facilitate user-led activities, and manage community collaborations.

5

Rethink Funding Models to Foster Innovation

Current funding models often fail to provide dedicated support for resource-intensive innovation, creating a gap between ambition and reality. Funding mechanisms must evolve to specifically support innovative and collaborative projects, which are more costly than simply adopting existing services. A lack of dedicated innovation funding is directly linked to a reduced ability to collaborate and develop novel services.

6

Address the gap between capabilities in small and large libraries

The need for a skills agenda and for dedicated funding is universal, but the urgency is greatest for smaller and stand-alone libraries. Both small public and small university libraries report significantly lower access to essential innovation skills and funding, making them a priority for targeted support programs. For university libraries, funding mechanisms should prioritize external grants and dedicated staffing support to enable more ambitious, resource-intensive collaborative innovations. For public libraries, policy should focus on making special government innovation funds more accessible to small libraries and those that currently lack in-house innovation skills, thereby breaking the cycle where only the most well-resourced institutions can secure project funding.

7

Context matters

The policy approach should be tailored to the unique environments of different libraries and consider the characteristics of the innovation. For public libraries, knowledge from users and non- profits is less useful for innovations with a digital component, while knowledge from users, non- managerial staff, and non-profits are more useful for service-only innovations than for combined service-process innovations. And, not surprisingly, user co-creation is less relevant when innovations are adapted from innovations already in use elsewhere and for which knowledge on their characteristics and outcomes is available to library staff. Awareness of context is an important reason for leadership that can effectively balance top-down and bottom-up innovation activities.

Cultivate Strategic and Balanced Leadership

Effective leadership is crucial for navigating the shift toward a more participatory and experimental library model. Policy and leadership must therefore enable libraries to embrace their expanding roles as hubs for social innovation, while ensuring that this evolution does not detract from, but rather strengthens, their core mission to support education, culture, and democracy.

8

- **For Practitioners:** Library leadership must strike a balance between encouraging bottom-up, grassroots innovation from staff and users, and providing top-down strategic direction. Leaders must be prepared to intervene or halt initiatives that fall outside the library's core mission to ensure alignment and quality.
- **For Policymakers:** Policymakers should establish a long-term strategy that enables both staff and users to experiment with new formats and services within the library's overall mission. It is crucial for policymakers to support the library when its innovation leads to public debate about its evolving role, provided the library is operating within its defined mandate. A key focus must be to explicitly empower library managers to balance top-down policies with bottom-up community needs and equipping them with the confidence to share decision-making power.

Promote Libraries as Essential Social Infrastructure

9

Policy and public perception should treat public libraries as essential community hubs that drive social innovation and public discussion. As libraries shift from simply providing books to actively engaging with community issues, they become unique "third places" where people connect and share ideas. This role is vital for fighting the social fragmentation caused by online algorithms. Supporting this new role means seeing libraries not just as places for information, but as engines for collaboration and as guardians of a healthy public sphere. Libraries are not a simple fix for social division; instead, they are the critical infrastructure for building a resilient democracy, offering a safe arena for the robust debate needed to challenge extreme views.

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