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LIBRARIES IN THE AGE OF AI:

Safeguarding Cultural Heritage and Trust

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1 Libraries at the Heart of Digital Democracy: Context and Challenges for AI Adoption

Libraries are vital pillars of democratic societies, and in today's fast-changing world, their role in fostering an informed and engaged community is more critical than ever. As essential public service providers, libraries are well equipped to tackle emergent societal challenges, such as the digital transformation through Artificial Intelligence (AI) adoption.

Our evidence from national libraries shows that AI adoption of library services is predominantly an issue of governance, ethics, and institutional resilience. If libraries remain invisible in Artificial Intelligence strategies, Europe risks missing a unique chance to use trusted public institutions as drivers of equitable and democratic digital transformation. Their experience highlights both the opportunities (greater access, efficiency, and innovation) and the risks (bias, exclusion, dependence on external service providers, and underfunding).

In short, national libraries can act as testbeds and mediators between AI systems and society, but only if their role is formally recognised, supported, and funded. This underlines the need for dedicated policy measures. The following section unpacks the policy implications of these challenges in detail.

1. AI in national libraries: What is Changing and Why It Matters

AI is rapidly transforming the public sector, and among libraries, especially national libraries stand at the forefront of this change. Traditionally seen as custodians of cultural heritage, these institutions increasingly leverage AI to manage large and complex datasets, automate cataloguing, improve metadata quality, and enable advanced search and discovery services for users. AI also offers opportunities for innovative services such as personalised recommendations, automatic transcription, and enhanced access to historical and multilingual content. However, these benefits come with significant organisational and societal implications.

The case of national libraries illustrates that implementing AI is not merely a technical upgrade but a comprehensive digital transformation process. It requires strategic vision, governance reform, and the integration of ethical principles into technological design.
The LibrarIN project's research, which included extensive interviews with library associations and AI experts across Europe and beyond, highlights that libraries must balance efficiency gains with their core mission of ensuring equitable, inclusive, and reliable access to information.
Unlike private-sector implementations driven by profit motives, **public-sector institutions must embed democratic values and public accountability in AI adoption**. This includes transparency about how AI tools are deployed, addressing potential biases, and ensuring that AI solutions enhance rather than undermine trust in public institutions. Ultimately, the experience of national libraries shows that AI can catalyse rethinking how public institutions deliver value, but only if implemented within robust ethical, legal, and governance frameworks that protect cultural heritage and public interest.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

"Having some sort of grounding basic and education in what that really is probably would be useful, to have a better understanding of what machine learning really means, how it can beused, the difference between natural language processing, large language models, transformer types, they're all different types of models for machine learning, and what the pitfalls are, what the challenges are, what the positive outcomes can be."
LibrarIN case study interviewee

1.2 *AI Policy in Europe: Where Do Libraries Stand?*

European policy documents such as the European AI Act and the Council of Europe Guidelines on Artificial Intelligence and Data Protection provide the regulatory basis for AI library services.[1] Its provisions for AI systems, their risk classifications, and the obligations for providers and deployers have an impact on how libraries use AI technologies and interact with AI service providers.

The upcoming European Culture Compass mentions the importance of a coordinated approach to digital innovation and AI across Member States.[2] Recent policy developments confirm this, with the EU's AI Act identifying 'culture' as one of 11 strategic sectors, and an overwhelming interest in the Horizon Europe call to leverage AI for creativity-driven innovation as highlighted during the 2025 LibrarIN policy roundtable on libraries in the age of AI.[3] This is expected to mature into a dedicated EU strategy for AI in the cultural sectors by 2027, with a library expert report forthcoming. Similarly, Luxembourg's national AI strategy classifies culture as a high-impact sector and identifies libraries as strategic actors for inclusion and AI maturity.[4]
The IFLA Statement on Libraries and Artificial Intelligence, acknowledges the rapid adoption of AI in private and public spheres and highlights the importance of the adoption of AI in everyday work in a library. The role libraries can play in educating users about AI to thrive in a society that uses AI more extensively, and finally, the role libraries can play in supporting ethical AI research.[5] At the same time, EBLIDA focuses on how libraries can best employ AI for service innovation and adapting to the rapidly evolving community needs.[6]

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[1] European Parliament, and Council of the European Union, "Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 Laying Down Harmonised Rules on Artificial Intelligence (Artificial Intelligence Act)," Official Journal of the European Union, 12 July 2024, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/1689.

[2] European Commission, "Culture Compass for Europe," European Commission, 24 July 2025, https://culture.ec.europa.eu/policies/culture-compass-for-europe.

[3] LibrarIN, "Policy Roundtable Libraries in the Age of AI: Safeguarding Knowledge, Culture and Trust", LibrarIN website 2025 https://librarin.eu/policy-roundtable-libraries-in-the-age-of-ai-safeguarding-knowledge-culture-and-trust/

[4] Government of Luxembourg, Ministry of State, "Accelerating Digital Sovereignty 2030 - Luxembourg's AI Strategy," Government of Luxembourg, 2025, https://gouvernement.lu/dam-assets/images-documents/actualites/2025/05/16-strategies-ai-donnees-quantum/2024115332-ministere-etat-strategy-ai-en-bat-acc-ua.pdf

[5] International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, "IFLA Statement on Libraries and Artificial Intelligence," IFLA, 2020, https://repository.ifla.org/handle/20.500.14598/1646.

[6] EBLIDA, "Power and Resilience: Books and Reading in the Age of AI," 33rd EBLIDA Annual Council and Conference, 7-9 April 2025, https://eblida2025.sciencesconf.org/?lang=en
Teresa Pombo, "AI: Strengths and Opportunities for Libraries, Librarians, and Users," 32nd EBLIDA Annual Council and Conference, 9 April 2024 https://eblida2024.sciencesconf.org/data/pages/09_april_1555_Pombo.pdf

The Council of Europe Recommendations on Library Policy and Legislation notes that the advancement of information technologies for all has brought forward new aspects to the library and recommends a digital transformation and the promotion of a sustainable, reliable, and inclusive library ecosystem (section IV). [7] Similarly, the **EU's Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026**, supported by its expert group on libraries, prioritises strengthening them as vital gateways to culture, skills, and information, acknowledging their long tradition of adapting to technological change.[8]

Looking at the EU priority of **Preparing our Union for the future**, a policy gap is identified, where Member States' policy frameworks lag the European ambitions on Digital innovation and AI. The LibrarIN project monitors the extent to which the recommendations of the Council of Europe and EBLIDA on library policy and regulation are reflected in European Member State policies, particularly in areas aligned with the project's research themes such as the digital transformation of library services. The LibrarIN Library Policy Tracker currently provides data for seventeen EU member states. All have national AI strategies, but only Slovenia shows signs of integrating libraries.[9] While most strategies do not mention libraries, Slovenia's National Programme for the Promotion of Artificial Intelligence connects AI goals with cultural policy, promoting fair use, human rights, and copyright in cultural institutions. Although libraries are not named directly, they are implicitly included as part of the cultural sector. Slovenia also references GDPR and ethical AI use in public library policy, suggesting a framework for responsible implementation. Out of the seventeen EU Member States currently with data in the policy tracker, only Denmark has a national AI policy framework that explicitly incorporates libraries as key actors in promoting the ethical use of AI. This includes provisions for the exchange of best practices and user education, and is guided by principles of transparency, accountability, and fairness. In general, national AI strategies across the EU show limited recognition of libraries as stakeholders in the ethical implementation of AI. Where ethical AI principles are addressed, libraries are often absent from the frameworks, even though they may already engage in related activities such as public education, dissemination of information, or digital literacy training.

[7] Committee of Ministers, "Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on Library Legislation and Policy in Europe, "Adopted 5 April 2023, https://search.coe.int/cm?i=0900001680aaced6.

[8] Open Method of Coordination (OMC) Group of Member States' Experts, "Building Bridges: Strengthen the Multiple Roles of Libraries as Gateways To and Transmitters of Cultural Works, Skills and European Values," https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14250-2023-INIT/en/pdf .

[9] LibrarIN "Library Policy Tracker," https://librarin.eu/toolkit/library-policy-tracker/.

1.3 Navigating Complexity: Why Responsible AI in Libraries Is Not Straightforward

The adoption of AI in national libraries, while promising, faces a series of complex challenges that require coordinated responses from policymakers, library leaders, and technology providers. These challenges can be grouped into four critical areas.

1 Ethical and legal considerations

AI introduces profound ethical and legal dilemmas, particularly regarding copyright compliance, data protection under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and the appropriate use of cultural heritage materials for training AI systems. Libraries must decide whether and how to make high-quality datasets available for AI development, balancing openness with legal obligations and reputational risks. Additionally, transparency toward users is critical; patrons should know when catalogue records or recommendations are generated by AI, including information about confidence levels and the possibility of inaccuracies. These concerns are amplified by the risk of algorithmic bias, which could perpetuate cultural or linguistic inequities, and by the broader question of whether AI deployment aligns with societal values and human rights principles embedded in European legal frameworks. Furthermore, AI models are not neutral. The ALIA initiative highlights considering intersectionality and how these tools, built on existing infrastructures, can compound social inequalities, such as by prioritising dominant languages.[10]

2 Human resource issues and organisational culture

Successful AI integration depends on human expertise at every stage. Librarians and information specialists must remain central to the process to ensure accuracy, interpretability, and user trust, commonly called keeping the "human in the loop." During the LibrarIN roundtable on Libraries in the Age of AI experts confirmed this with practical experience and their examples highlight that AI suggestions for classification are not always reliable, making human validation essential to preserve quality. Yet, most libraries face a digital skills gap, with limited in-house AI and machine learning expertise. Upskilling staff through training and creating interdisciplinary teams that bridge librarianship, data science, and legal expertise is essential. Resistance to change and fears of job displacement further complicate adoption, underscoring the need for inclusive approaches that frame AI as a complement to human work rather than a replacement. The LibrarIN roundtable discussions revealed this fear is widespread, stemming from a sense that the change is too fast and a basic lack of understanding of the technology. Organisational culture must shift to embrace experimentation, accept mistakes as part of learning, and foster collaboration across departments and with external partners.

[10] ALIA, "Proyecto ALIA: Artificial Intelligence Language Infrastructure of Spain," https://alia.gob.es/eng/.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

"Hearings, where this particular project was talked about and reminded that because supervising body is of course interested in what are you doing with artificial intelligence, how do we know it's safe, how do we know that you can trust it, is it going to do horrible things, what about the ethical concerns, what about [...]"

LibrarIN case study interviewee

3 Technological expertise and infrastructure

AI development and integration require advanced technical capabilities and robust infrastructure, areas where many public institutions remain under-resourced. Dependence on large commercial vendors raises concerns about sovereignty, long-term control over data, and the suitability of tools primarily designed for English-language contexts. While open-source systems offer one alternative, they are not always easy to implement and require a significant investment of time and expertise as became clear during the LibrarIN roundtable discussion. national libraries need scalable, interoperable systems and the ability to develop or adapt AI models that respect local languages and cultural norms. Achieving this technical independence is vital for operational sustainability and preserving public values in an increasingly globalised AI ecosystem. This conversation must also include the underlying infrastructure, such as data centers, to ensure that a shift to new services does not lead to the privatization of public data, as stressed by foresight experts at the LibrarIN policy roundtable.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

"I would never recommend that beginners or unprofessional people would be told to use this program. But if you're expert on the subject matter of the resources, then you can use it without much experience. But if you're not familiar with that, then it's much more difficult and requires more expertise practice."

LibrarIN case study interviewee

4 Securing sustainable funding

AI projects are resource-intensive and extend far beyond the prototyping stage. Many libraries report funding gaps that prevent them from moving from pilot initiatives to full-scale implementation and ongoing maintenance. Budget constraints often force compromises on quality or scope, undermining project outcomes and stakeholder trust. Furthermore, AI systems demand continuous updates, staff training, infrastructure investments, and attention to sustainability concerns such as energy consumption.

Without dedicated, long-term funding streams that cover the entire lifecycle, from research and development to operation and governance, libraries risk implementing fragile solutions that cannot deliver their promised benefits. Participants of the LibrarIN roundtable highlighted that this resource challenge is compounded by librarians' reluctance to apply for complex grants like Horizon Europe, where failure is seen as a risk, making programs like Erasmus+ feel more accessible for training. As there is no single fund for libraries, they must become more agile, break out of their bubble, and target diverse funding streams to promote their multiple roles.

The evidence from national libraries shows that AI adoption in the public sector is not a matter of technology alone but of governance, ethics, and institutional resilience.

If libraries are not considered in AI strategies, Europe risks missing a unique chance to use trusted public institutions as drivers of equitable and democratic digital transformation.

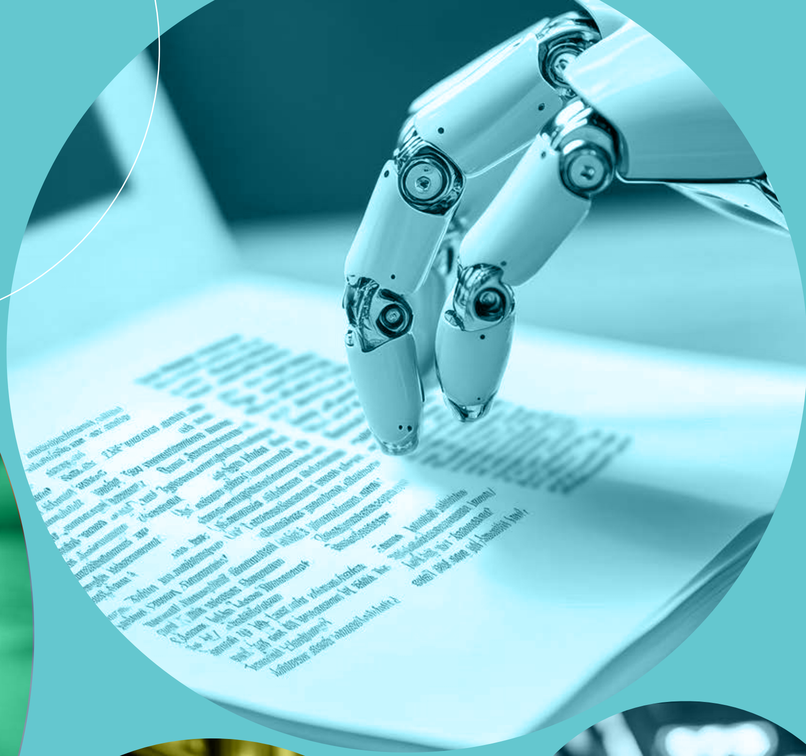
Their experience highlights both the opportunities (greater access, efficiency, and innovation) and the risks (bias, exclusion, dependence on external providers, and underfunding).

This underlines the need for dedicated policy measures.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

"Sometimes it's frustrating that we don't have a lot of money, so we have to think about every Euro we spend."

LibrarIN case study interviewee



2. | Evidence from the Field: How national libraries Implement AI

The LibrarIN project investigated how AI is being adopted across European national libraries, focusing on identifying implementation challenges, benefits, and broader impacts. Based on ca. 60 expert interviews and detailed case studies, this summary outlines the most policy-relevant findings regarding AI-driven digital transformation, the technologies in use, and their implications for institutions, users, and society.

2.1 *Closing the Gap Between Innovation and Public Sector Reality*

National libraries are increasingly positioned as early adopters of AI in the public sector, yet they face recurring and interrelated challenges. While AI offers new opportunities for increasing efficiency, access, and user engagement, libraries must navigate complex regulatory, ethical, technical, and organisational constraints. The evidence points to **a gap between the strategic promises of AI and the institutional capacity of libraries to implement and sustain these innovations under real-world conditions.**

2.2 *What Drives AI Adoption in Libraries? Seven Key Motivations*

The analysis identifies seven major drivers that explain why national libraries are actively integrating AI tools into their operations and services.

1. Improving Access and Discoverability: Libraries digitise legacy collections and use AI to automate subject indexing, classification, and metadata enrichment. These processes expand public access and enhance navigation of vast and diverse datasets.

2. Scaling Efficiency for Large Data Volumes: The exponential growth of digital content renders traditional cataloguing methods impractical. AI reduces manual workloads and accelerates processing, helping address backlogs and improve resource allocation.

3. Enabling Research and Innovation: Tools like semantic search, data visualisation, and text mining support new forms of scholarly inquiry and public engagement, extending the research capabilities of library users.

4. Responding to Legal and Policy Pressures: EU regulations (e.g., text and data mining directives, accessibility mandates) are prompting libraries to adopt AI to remain compliant and align with national digitisation policies.

5. Preserving Linguistic and Cultural Diversity: Libraries are developing AI tools in local languages to counterbalance the dominance of commercial, English-language tools to safeguard national cultural assets.

6. Meeting Changing User Expectations: Citizens increasingly expect personalised services, multilingual support, and real-time search. AI enables user-adaptive systems that enhance relevance, usability, and accessibility.

7. Fostering Digital and Societal Competence: AI experimentation strengthens institutional learning and contributes to broader digital literacy among staff and patrons, underlining the social role of libraries in promoting responsible AI use. This is critical, as recent studies show young people may be competent at searching but perform poorly in evaluating AI-generated results, a skills gap that libraries can address.[11] Public engagement initiatives, such as the 'AI Parade' in the Netherlands which has reached over a million citizens through libraries, serve as a successful model for this new role.[12]

2.3 *How Libraries Use AI: From Data Management to Discovery*

Libraries employ a broad range of AI technologies, with three core domains of application:

1. Internal Library Processes: Automated Subject Indexing, Optical Character Recognition (OCR), and Handwritten Text Recognition (HTR) are widely used to enhance metadata creation and access to digitised content. Generative AI technologies, including Large Language Models (LLMs) and Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR), are also being introduced to support transcription, summarisation, and content tagging. These tools are vital for modernising cataloguing and unlocking hidden heritage in historical manuscripts and audio-visual archives.

2. Services for Private Users: AI supports advanced user services such as personalised recommendations, adaptive search engines, and conversational interfaces. These tools improve user engagement and streamline access to digital repositories. In some cases, AI even assists users during submission processes (e.g., student theses) by offering automated subject suggestions.

3. Sector-Wide Support for the GLAM Community: national libraries are increasingly offering AI infrastructure (e.g., transcription tools, metadata generators) to other cultural institutions in the GLAM sector. This strengthens interoperability, avoids duplication, and fosters collaborative innovation across museums, archives, and galleries.

[11] The Danish Think Tank- Libraries of the Future, "Information Literacy in a New Age: Findings, Recommendations and Approaches To Teaching Information Literacy To Students," 2025, https://www.fremtidensbiblioteker.dk/upl/website/analysis--projects/InformationLiteractinaNewAge.pdf.

[12] Koninklijke Bibliotheek, "AI Parade,"LibrarIN what-works-database, 2025, https://librarin.eu/toolkit/what-works- db/details/22529.

2.4 *What Changes with AI? Institutional, User, and Societal Effects*

The application of AI in libraries produces tangible and strategic benefits across multiple levels.

1. Outputs (Direct Deliverables): AI projects have led to the development of open-source tools, automation pipelines, and in-house innovation labs. Libraries now provide modular AI systems for indexing and cataloguing, enhancing their service offerings to the broader research and cultural community. AI-enabled discovery tools, including semantic and transcription-based search systems, have also been deployed to enhance content accessibility and usability.

2. Outcomes (Institutional and User-Level Change): Organisational structures are shifting, with new roles emerging (e.g., ML engineers, AI governance leads) and existing roles evolving to include AI competencies. Cross-departmental and cross-sector collaboration has increased, reflecting a growing culture of experimentation and adaptability. On the user side, search quality and service personalisation have improved significantly.

3. Impacts (Strategic and Societal Value): At the strategic level, AI strengthens the role of national libraries as ethical curators of public information. It supports efforts to preserve endangered languages, enhances the scalability of cultural preservation, and enables public engagement with previously inaccessible content. Societally, libraries are becoming platforms for AI education, offering trusted spaces to engage critically with emerging technologies. However, these benefits can be counterbalanced by AI bias, a lack of transparency, and concerns about trustworthiness.

2.5 Barriers to Sustainable AI Adoption

Despite these gains, several persistent challenges must be addressed to ensure that AI adoption in libraries is sustainable, equitable, and aligned with public values:

• **Ethical Considerations:** Key risks include bias in training data, explainability of outputs, and privacy protection. Public trust in libraries as neutral and authoritative institutions may erode without safeguards.

• **Legal Constraints:** Copyright limitations restrict the use of high-quality data for training. Negotiated access agreements are often necessary but require legal expertise and long-term monitoring.

• **Staff Concerns and Workforce Development:** Automation creates fears of job displacement and raises questions about the role of human expertise. Upskilling is urgently needed, but many staff lack foundational AI literacy.

• **Quality Assurance:** AI-generated outputs require human oversight due to frequent inaccuracies, especially in complex classification tasks. Manual verification remains critical but resource intensive.

• **Cultural and Organisational Resistance:** Shifting organisational mindsets toward experimentation and AI openness remains difficult, particularly when AI is perceived as opaque or misaligned with library values.

• **Vendor Dependence and Technological Sovereignty:** Overreliance on external providers can limit institutional control and pose long-term sustainability risks. Building in-house capacity and using open-source tools are strategic countermeasures.

• **Language Inequality and Data Limitations:** Many AI tools are biased toward dominant languages, often perpetuating language inequality. Libraries must invest in local model training and shared data repositories to ensure linguistic inclusion.

• **Financial Constraints:** Advanced AI systems require sustained investment in infrastructure, personnel, and ongoing maintenance. Without adequate funding, innovation risks stagnation.

3. /Policy Pathways for Responsible AI in Libraries

The implementation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in national libraries reflects a growing shift in the public sector toward data-driven innovation. However, it also exposes a critical policy gap: **while many AI strategies focus on industry and infrastructure, libraries remain largely invisible in national and European digital agenda**s. Findings from the **LibrarIN project** confirm that key implementation principles—technical independence, interdisciplinary collaboration, and sustainable funding—remain valid. However, through extensive expert interviews, these principles have been further refined, contextualised, and extended to address the specific realities of library environments.

The evidence gathered from AI practitioners, library experts, and policy stakeholders makes one point clear: generic AI frameworks are insufficient for institutions with a unique public knowledge mission. To bridge the gap between principle and practice, the following recommendations offer targeted policy actions across three critical domains: strategic integration, capacity building, and ethical implementation. These pillars are designed to ensure that national libraries are not just adapting to digital transformation but are empowered to shape it in line with democratic values and public trust.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Strategic Integration:
Including Libraries in AI and Digital Strategies

Libraries play a central role in preserving cultural heritage, promoting democratic values, and providing equitable access to knowledge. Yet they are rarely featured explicitly in AI roadmaps or digital transformation frameworks. The lack of formal recognition means libraries often operate at the periphery of funding schemes, procurement policies, and technical capability building.

National and European AI strategies should explicitly name and support libraries as priority domains to bridge this gap. This includes recognising the unique AI use cases in the library sector, such as heritage digitisation, multilingual model development, automated metadata processing, and designing dedicated instruments that reflect their mission. Moreover, libraries should be involved not only as end-users but as co-creators of policy, infrastructure, and research agendas related to trustworthy and inclusive AI.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Capacity Building: Supporting Library-Specific Literacy and Training

One of the clearest findings from the LibrarIN study is the mismatch between the technical demands of AI systems and the current skillsets among library staff. AI adoption cannot succeed without investment in people, not just IT professionals, but also cataloguers, curators, and metadata specialists. Therefore, **policies should support structured digital literacy programmes tailored to the library context**. These should focus on the practical application of AI in areas like machine learning-assisted cataloguing, human-in-the-loop workflows, and metadata interoperability. Importantly, capacity building should treat librarians as active agents in AI design and governance, helping them navigate both opportunities and limitations of emerging tools. This requires multi-year funding commitments, integration into formal training programmes, and support for cross-sector partnerships between libraries, universities, and AI experts. Global resources, such as the 6-week online MOOC on AI and digital transformation offered by UNESCO and Oxford, can support this capacity-building for public sector professionals.[13]

RECOMMENDATION 3

Ethical Implementation: Promoting Context-Specific AI Governance

As stewards of public trust and cultural memory, libraries operate under ethical standards that differ significantly from commercial AI deployments. The LibrarIN project revealed strong concern about ethical risks, particularly regarding copyright, data bias, transparency, and the potential for "AI hallucinations" in public-facing records. Consequently, ethical AI governance must be tailored to the library environment. This includes mechanisms for:

- **Transparent labelling of AI-generated records;**
- **Confidence levels and traceability in automated outputs;**
- **Inclusive model training that accounts for small languages and marginalised knowledge;**
- **Human-in-the-loop processes that respect professional expertise.**

National and EU policies should embed these requirements into AI legislation, funding frameworks, and public sector guidance. Moreover, libraries should be supported in developing their own internal AI ethics frameworks, including audits, risk assessments, and participatory design practices involving staff and users alike. Libraries can leverage their high public trust to serve as safe places that ensure privacy and work to prevent algorithms from creating or reinforcing inequalities.

[13] University of Oxford and UNESCO, "AI and Digital Transformation in Government: A Global Course for Civil Servants,"2025, https://secure.sbs.ox.ac.uk/corporate/landingPage.do?method=load&corporateGroupId=2294264

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