

## **Not just a book lady: Shifting perceptions of librarians' role in the 21st Century**

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### **Abstract**

The role of librarians has undergone a profound transformation in the 21st century. Once perceived primarily as custodians of books and quiet spaces, librarians are now essential players in digital literacy, research support, community engagement, and technological innovation. However, outdated stereotypes continue to shape public perception, often failing to reflect the evolving realities of the profession. This disconnect challenges the recognition and full utilisation of librarians' expertise in modern information environments. This research explores how perceptions of librarianship have shifted over time and emphasises the dynamic, multifaceted responsibilities librarians now undertake. As a secondary research study, the paper draws from a wide range of existing literature, including academic journals, case studies, and professional reports, to examine the transformation of the librarian's role in various contexts, particularly in academic and public libraries. Findings indicate contemporary librarians are information managers, digital navigators, instructional partners, and community advocates. They contribute significantly to online learning, data management, information ethics, and user empowerment. However, despite these expanded roles, many librarians still face limitations in public understanding due to persistent traditional stereotypes. This research concludes that to bridge the gap between perception and reality, there must be increased advocacy, visibility, and professional development. Recognising and promoting the modern librarian's role will enhance the profession's image and ensure its continued relevance and impact in today's knowledge-driven society.

**Keywords:** Digital literacy, librarianship, information management, professional development, public perception

### **Introduction**

Persistent stereotypes about librarians that they are primarily women who spend their days shelving books and shushing patrons continue to shape public perception of the profession. In popular culture and everyday discourse, the image of a librarian is often reduced to a quiet, bespectacled figure who manages books and enforces silence. Although this limited representation is well-known, it ignores the intricacy and development of librarianship as a vocation. Librarians have always been stewards of knowledge, but their responsibilities have drastically changed as technology has advanced, information behaviour has changed, and digital literacy

has grown. In addition to managing information, librarians now work as educators, digital curators, researchers, and community engagement experts. Despite these advancements, the general public's perception of librarians and their roles is still mainly antiquated and oversimplified (Luthmann, 2007).

More than just being inaccurate, the persistent perception of librarians as quiet "shushers" undermines their professional identities and poses real problems for the industry. According to Seminelli (2016), these simplistic representations reduce the perceived worth of librarians' efforts, particularly when financing and institutional support are

involved. Public perceptions are still influenced by this stereotype, which frequently results in a lack of understanding of the changing duties of librarians. Pagowsky and Rigby (2014) draw attention to the discrepancy between perception and reality, stating that although librarians have assumed active roles in community involvement, teaching, and digital curation, they are still mostly viewed through an antiquated prism. According to Jennings (2016), librarians could contribute to spreading these myths by obligingly accepting how the media presents these issues. Furthermore, as Klein and Lenart (2020) noted, this essentialist and constrained identity fuels more fundamental structural problems in the field, such as a dearth of diversity and high minority librarian attrition rates. The pressing need to change the perception of librarianship is reflected in each of these difficulties.

This study addresses these issues by critically analysing the myths about librarians and investigating how their functions have changed in response to historical, technological, and sociological advancements. The examination will examine how these changing dynamics have impacted the profession's internal organisation and public perception. This work offers a thorough overview of the evolving nature of librarianship by employing a secondary research technique that draws on current scholarly literature, theoretical ideas, historical narratives, and documented case studies. The report also highlights the necessity of deliberate rebranding initiatives that more accurately represent librarians' varied, contemporary roles in an information-driven society. A more straightforward route to reclaiming and reinventing what it means to be a librarian in the twenty-first century is established by this research, which adds to the rising conversation on visibility, recognition, and identity in the field by fusing interdisciplinary viewpoints from media studies, library science, and

professional practice (Klein & Lenart (2020).

### **Traditional versus modern views of librarianship**

Over time, librarianship has changed significantly due to evolving educational emphasis, technological advancements, and societal ideals. According to Gorman (2015), these changes reflect larger societal movements constantly redefining librarianship. According to Lowry (2019), librarians have historically been seen primarily as custodians of tangible collections, organising resources, upholding discipline, and enforcing quiet in library areas. Although necessary, this custodial role strongly emphasised administrative control and order above engagement and creativity. According to McCook and Sierpe (2003), early libraries prioritised collection administration and access control, frequently at the price of user interaction or technological adaptation. In this situation, the librarian acted more as a gatekeeper than a guide, controlling static resources rather than actively participating in the user's educational process.

However, the demands of the digital age have fundamentally changed this story. Today's librarian must be adaptable, tech-savvy, and focused on providing user-centred services. According to Kuhlthau (2001, 2007), modern librarianship is centred on helping users navigate intricate information ecosystems, imparting key information literacy skills, and assisting with academic and individual research. In the era of information overload, librarians must continue to demonstrate their relevance while responding to user perceptions influenced by the fallacy that "everything is online," according to Ptak-Danchak (2012). Given the necessity to react quickly to changing user expectations, Koh and Abbas (2015) point out that technological adaptation and continual professional development are now crucial components of librarianship.

This change from gatekeeping to facilitating shows how far the profession has come and where it is headed, reflecting a larger dedication to accessibility, empowerment, and lifelong learning.

### **Common stereotypes and misconceptions**

Despite having a long history, librarianship is nevertheless shaped by enduring misconceptions that understate its breadth as a profession. According to Roggau (2006), these myths, such as the notion that librarians only impose silence or shelve books, have influenced public perception and reduced understanding of the complexity of the profession for a long time. Like this, Stout (2004) notes that librarians are frequently depicted as reclusive or rigid, which is inaccurate given the modern job's demands for interaction, analysis, and technological know-how. These out-of-date representations, which are woven into popular discourse, mask the librarian's changing roles as a teacher, digital guide, and community organiser (Luthmann, 2007). Such portrayals undermine the legitimacy of librarianship and downplay its contributions to information access and intellectual growth by reducing it to a passive, nearly extinct profession (Roggau, 2006; Stout, 2004).

Because of these misconceptions, librarians today face the constant battle of changing their perspective to reflect the realities of their work. According to reports, librarians are often perceived as low-status employees whose jobs do not call for academic degrees (Majid & Haider, 2008), which runs counter to the knowledge increasingly crucial in the industry. According to Makwana and Gadhavi (2023), librarians today play a crucial role in digital scholarship by providing essential assistance in fields like multidisciplinary research, data curation, and information literacy. Loesch (2017) adds that some librarians even have teaching positions that keep with the trend

toward a more academic and strategic role. Their initiatives to support lifelong learning and increase access to digital content highlight how the profession has changed. Addressing these antiquated presumptions is essential to promoting greater support, more funding, and a broader public understanding of librarians' critical responsibility in an information-rich society. It is not only about appearance.

### **Evolution of the librarian's role**

Librarians have a long history dating back to ancient civilisations, when they were essential to the organisation and preservation of knowledge. Librarians were regarded as the custodians of intellectual and religious literature in cities such as Mesopotamia and Alexandria, and later in monastic libraries during the Middle Ages. Despite frequently going unnoticed, their efforts established the groundwork for intellectual preservation (Ilesanmi, 2013). Case (2008) points out that this function grew more formalised in academic environments during the Renaissance and Enlightenment, with librarians supporting scholarly endeavours and helping with cataloguing. However, their influence mainly remained hidden because of the time's physical formats and delayed diffusion methods. These restrictions characterised a vital but frequently disregarded profession, subtly advancing research and teaching through painstaking archival work.

With the introduction of digital technology, this dynamic started to change, radically changing the character and reach of librarianship. The emergence of digital databases, computers, and the internet brought new technologies that allowed librarians to do much more than handle print resources. Nur (2023) claims that librarians have adjusted by mastering virtual reference services, digital curation, and teaching digital literacy. This is corroborated by Makwana and Gadhavi (2023), who note that librarians are now

actively involved in research, innovation, and the exchange of institutional knowledge. Managing intricate digital ecosystems and assisting consumers in traversing enormous and frequently bewildering online information landscapes are now among their duties (Verma, 2015). In addition, Sarasvathy et al. (2012) stress that the contemporary librarian is a resource manager, collaborator, and educator. Their significance in both the academic and public spheres is highlighted by the fact that these individuals must become proficient in metadata management and digital preservation as libraries become more virtual.

Apart from the advancement of technology, cultural and gender-related norms have also influenced the librarian's professional identity. According to Mars (2018), the 20th-century feminisation of the field introduced presumptions that associated librarianship with caring, administrative assistance rather than competence or leadership. According to Bryant et al. (2019), these prejudices led to underrepresentation in decision-making positions and a decline in professional prestige. Limited views of librarians' roles have been further reinforced by cultural expectations regarding their behaviour, appearance, and service orientation (Pagowsky & Rigby, 2014). However, according to Golub and José (2014), there is a growing movement to question these antiquated ideas and demand more respect, diversity, and visibility. Redefining librarianship entails honouring its rich history while fearlessly assuming positions that meet the demands of contemporary education, society, and technology as these fields advance.

### **The contemporary librarian: Roles, skills, and public perception**

Beyond their traditional function as bookkeepers, modern librarians now manage a wide range of professional responsibilities that reflect the complexity of today's information ecosystem. Kinkus

(2007) asserts that modern librarians are multifaceted professionals who now offer research assistance, educational services, and community engagement. Fraser-Arnott (2017) asserts that these professionals actively work with academics, students, and other public members to encourage lifelong learning and increase accessibility to reliable information. Mustar and Rahmadanita (2023) assert that this dynamic transformation calls for strong organisational, problem-solving, and communication abilities in addition to technical ability. Librarians must remain adaptable as information users' needs become more complex, fusing their core expertise with contemporary service techniques.

The librarian's function has been further altered by incorporating digital tools and developing technology. Digital transformation has brought sophisticated systems like online repositories, big data analytics, and artificial intelligence into library operations (Kumar & Jyoti, 2024). In addition to using AI-powered cataloguing systems, managing institutional repositories, and providing virtual support, librarians are increasingly expected to protect user privacy and ensure ethical technology use (Adesina & Zubairu, 2024). According to Narendra et al. (2025), librarians can improve user experiences and fine-tune services by using data analytics to study user behaviour. Mala (2024) emphasises that these advancements necessitate continuous training, demonstrating the flexibility required to stay relevant in a field that is becoming more and more tech-centric. Essentially, librarianship is now a proactive, strategic, and tech-driven profession rather than a transactional one.

However, public views do not necessarily reflect this professional development. According to Green (1994), the public still views librarians as having more conventional responsibilities, frequently ignoring their profession's strategic and intellectual demands. Ten

Hoeve et al. (2014) claim that this perceived gap can impede investment in professional development and library services and contribute to the profession's undervaluation. Similarly, Girvin et al. (2016) contend that librarians' contributions to research and teaching are usually disregarded despite their crucial functions. More than clearing up misconceptions is needed to close this gap; librarians must be positioned as key contributors to knowledge creation, digital literacy, and institutional innovation through visible narratives (Ten Hoeve et al., 2014).

Attempts to reinvent the librarian's identity are more difficult because pop culture and media depictions frequently perpetuate antiquated assumptions. According to Luthmann (2007), librarians are frequently depicted as inflexible or socially isolated, neglecting their roles in academic leadership, social activism, and digital innovation. In addition to misleading the public, these representations risk discouraging prospective professionals from pursuing careers in the sector. According to Pagowsky and Rigby (2014), these false statements stifle creativity and variety by upholding limited expectations. However, more and more librarians are taking charge of their public image, showcasing the leadership, innovation, and technological know-how now ingrained in the field through storytelling, community involvement, and rebranding initiatives (White, 2012). The continued relevance and expansion of librarianship depend on its exposure and accurate portrayal as society grows more dependent on information and technology.

### **Implications of misconceptions for the Profession**

Misconceptions about librarianship can significantly influence how society perceives, values, and supports the profession. These false or outdated assumptions often obscure librarians'

evolving roles in digital information management, research support, and knowledge dissemination. This section explores the broader implications of such misconceptions on librarians' professional identity, growth opportunities, and institutional relevance, especially in an era increasingly shaped by technology and misinformation.

### **Impact on funding, policy, and institutional support**

The perception of librarians and libraries significantly impacts how organisations set priorities for infrastructure development, staffing, and finance. Libraries are commonly exposed to decreasing funds and overlooked in strategic planning efforts when perceived as outdated or ancillary to primary academic purposes (Young et al., 2021). According to Shafack (2020), organisations that value the library's developing function as a centre for civic participation, research collaboration, and digital literacy are more likely to make deliberate investments in its expansion. As Cox (2018) points out, when librarians' services align with larger educational or national development ambitions, their proactive advocacy and visibility frequently catalyse institutional support. It has been noted that library professionals receive greater support and recognition when they clearly state how their work fits into the institution's objectives. Ultimately, the interaction between institutional awareness and public perception affects whether library services are sustainable and their potential to flourish in the face of shifting technology and societal demands.

### **Gender bias and its professional consequences**

Librarians' professional identities and experiences at work have been consistently shaped by gender bias. Librarianship has historically been feminised, frequently associated with caring and administrative responsibilities rather than innovation in

technology or leadership (Mars, 2018). According to Neigel (2015), this belief has resulted in the systematic undervaluation of the field, where female librarians typically have lower institutional recognition, fewer prospects for progression, and compensation disparities compared to their male counterparts. Additionally, these gendered presumptions have quietly influenced workplace dynamics and hiring decisions by determining which duties are considered appropriate for women and perpetuating antiquated ideas about their talents. Golub and José (2014) also contend that a contemporary gender gap has developed in librarianship, with women being confined to operational or management positions while having equivalent or superior qualifications, while men are more linked to digital innovation.

These gender dynamics have an impact that goes well beyond a person's professional experiences; they also influence how librarianship is viewed more broadly in institutions and society. According to Hicks et al. (2022), ingrained gender norms impede the visibility and professional advancement of current librarians in addition to limiting the diversity of those entering the industry. This discrepancy between perception and reality erodes the profession's growing significance in knowledge-based settings and reduces its impact. Fostering inclusive leadership structures, promoting wage fairness, and combating reductive media representations that limit librarians to conventional moulds are critical in addressing these problems (Mars, 2018). By addressing these prejudices, the field can more accurately represent contemporary librarianship's intricacy, expertise, and creativity.

### **Career advancement and professional recognition**

Institutional frameworks, academic credentials, and the rate of technological adaptation have all long-impacted

librarianship career advancement and professional recognition (Jackson, 1999; Meena, 2024). Although it is typical for librarians to seek professional certifications and postgraduate degrees to elevate their status, prospects for promotion are frequently limited at institutions that oppose change or place little emphasis on changing library functions. Specialisation in cutting-edge fields like data science, information literacy, and digital curation is becoming increasingly regarded as a strategic route to leadership, in line with institutional moves toward innovation and digital transformation (Cox & Corral, 2013). However, Jackson (1999) has pointed out that even with these developments, librarians' contributions to research infrastructure and knowledge systems are still commonly disregarded, especially in interdisciplinary settings. To reposition librarians as crucial partners in education and innovation, professional visibility is being enhanced through participation in outreach programs, academic alliances, and policymaking (Meena, 2024).

### **Toward rebranding and advocacy**

In light of the persistent misconceptions and evolving demands placed on the profession, rebranding and advocacy have become essential strategies for repositioning librarianship in the modern information landscape. This section examines the need for a renewed professional image that reflects the dynamic, technology-driven roles librarians now play. It also highlights the importance of proactive advocacy efforts to raise public awareness, influence policy, and attract greater institutional and societal recognition for the profession.

### **Role of professional bodies and educational institutions**

By creating a curriculum that considers the evolving needs of information management, professional associations and academic institutions play a crucial role in

forming librarianship by guaranteeing that librarians acquire both conventional and digital abilities (Corrall, 2010). These groups oversee accrediting, establishing moral guidelines, and promoting the profession's interests (Khoo et al., 2003). They promote career advancement and innovation by offering venues for continuous professional development, networking, and the sharing of knowledge (Meena, 2024). Additionally, these organisations contribute to the field's continued relevance and adaptability in an increasingly digital environment by fostering collaboration, advancing best practices, and strengthening librarians' professional identities (Shaukat, 2021). To improve the profession's global perspective and equip aspiring librarians for the challenges of the twenty-first century, Shaukat (2021) highlights the importance of professional bodies in raising educational standards, planning conferences, and promoting international exchanges (Meena, 2024).

### **Leveraging media, outreach, and digital platforms**

Libraries are using social media and outreach programs more and more to broaden their audience and improve their offerings. Libraries now depend on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter to exchange information, encourage literacy, and communicate with patrons in real time (Dixit, 2023). According to Abdullah et al. (2015), these digital tools are essential for libraries to stay relevant in the current digital environment because they enable them to interact with a broader range of users and demonstrate their changing roles. According to Peacock and Wurm (2013), academic librarians defy old assumptions by taking on new duties beyond their usual ones, particularly in technology and digital resources. Additionally, outreach initiatives aimed at marginalised communities, such as multicultural groups and transfer students, are becoming more widespread, which raises the library's

profile and firmly establishes it as a focal point for campus education (Kraemer et al., 2003).

### **Conclusion**

Librarians are now dynamic information workers with a wide range of abilities appropriate for the digital age, rather than just being traditional book caretakers. Technological developments, shifting social norms, and the demand for increased exposure and interaction have all impacted this shift. Nonetheless, the profession is confronted with enduring prejudices, gender biases, and gaps in public knowledge. Coordinated efforts involving professional development, education, institutional support, and the purposeful use of outreach and the media are needed to address these problems. Librarians may continue to influence the profession's future in an inclusive and significant way by embracing innovation and promoting their diverse contributions.

### **Recommendations**

As librarians' roles continue to evolve in response to rapid technological advancements and changing user expectations, it is essential to implement forward-looking strategies that support their growth, visibility, and impact. This section outlines key recommendations to strengthen the profession through continuous professional development, targeted advocacy, institutional reform, and inclusive leadership. Together, these measures are designed to equip librarians with the necessary skills, recognition, and support systems to thrive in the digital age while reshaping public perceptions and enhancing the overall relevance of the profession.

1. Opportunities for continuous professional development that concentrate on important topics like data management, digital literacy, AI integration, and future technologies must be provided to librarians. This can assist in

- guaranteeing that librarians remain current and prepared to handle the changing needs of users in digital contexts. This kind of training is necessary for librarians to adjust to the quick changes in technology, which will ultimately help them deliver efficient services in a world that is becoming increasingly digital. Librarians may better handle the complexity of today's information ecosystems and preserve their usefulness in the larger research and educational communities by consistently improving their abilities.
2. To change public opinion, libraries and professional associations should prioritize strategic outreach through influencer alliances, social media engagement, and other media initiatives. Such initiatives are crucial for dispelling outdated perceptions and showcasing the varied and evolving functions of librarians. By emphasising success stories and demonstrating librarians' broader impact on research, education, and community involvement, a more realistic and vibrant picture of the profession can be promoted. In addition to enhancing public awareness, these programs improve libraries' prominence and significance in today's information-driven world.
  3. Institutions must prioritise policy changes that guarantee fair funding, inclusive recruiting procedures, and increased acknowledgement of librarians' contributions in academic and research settings. This change entails promoting the inclusion of librarians in strategic decision-making and recognising their critical role. Institutions should better support librarians' professional development and acknowledge their growing significance in influencing the research and educational landscapes by encouraging such reforms. Ultimately, these adjustments would contribute to developing a culture that views librarians as essential collaborators in advancing organisational objectives and fostering creativity.
  4. Addressing gender bias and the obstacles to professional advancement in librarianship requires the development of mentorship programs that emphasise leadership development, particularly for underrepresented groups, by removing long-standing structural barriers. Such initiatives can promote a more diverse and empowered leadership pipeline. By focusing on these underrepresented groups, these programs help change the profession's leadership structure moving forward and provide possibilities for growth. As a result, encouraging diversity in leadership positions can help dispel preconceived notions and ensure that librarianship evolves into a more vibrant and inclusive profession.

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