Enabling Inclusive Civic Engagement in AI Initiatives: The Case of Queens Public Library*

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Abstract

In tandem with emerging trends in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and its potential risks, scholars and practitioners advocate for inclusive civic engagement in AI initiatives to mitigate some of the unintended consequences and foster quality and accountability in AI systems. Yet, marginalized populations are often overlooked, and practical mechanisms for their participation remain scarce and unexplored. As anchor institutions, this ongoing research paper argues that public libraries are uniquely positioned to address this gap. Based on the case of Queens Public Library (QPL) in New York, we found that libraries have the potential to promote inclusive civic engagement in AI by offering multilingual programs and integrating diverse courses that empower community members with critical AI knowledge and some important skills. Despite these efforts, resource constraints, the complexity of addressing diverse needs, and limited in-house AI expertise continue to pose challenges. This study contributes to current research by identifying and explaining the current and potential roles of public libraries regarding inclusive civic engagement in AI initiatives.

Keywords

artificial intelligence, public libraries, civic engagement, community involvement, marginalized populations, case study

1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has been increasingly introduced in the public sector and is constantly integrated into the decision-making, service delivery, and evaluation of government actions [13, 30, 41, 49, 53]. Along with its great opportunities, the use of AI simultaneously entails different types of risks, resulting in a variety of societal and ethical issues, which need to be considered. They range from privacy and safety issues to the financial feasibility of AI investments and infrastructures [50], as well as disparate outcomes produced by AI systems that might harm marginalized populations [17, 47]. Given the potential negative impacts of AI, an inclusive approach that incorporates citizens and stakeholders in AI initiatives is deemed essential by both scholars and practitioners to mitigate risks and produce benefits for all [4, 15, 42].

Civic engagement in AI initiatives is viewed as one of the strategies that can not only address the unintended risks of AI but also amplify the benefits associated with its development. On the risk mitigation side, inclusive and meaningful public inputs serve as a check against potential harm. Stakeholders in AI initiatives can identify potentially biased outcomes early in the development process and restore negative consequences through established evaluation mechanisms [14, 40]. From the perspective of realizing the benefits of AI systems, by incorporating the diverse views and knowledge of stakeholders in AI initiatives, their design and deployment

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could more effectively respond to stakeholders' needs, as well as enhance the transparency and quality of AI systems [1, 4]. Furthermore, it fosters a sense of ownership among citizens, which can lead to more responsible AI governance as communities are empowered and stakeholders' knowledge of AI is advanced [15, 42, 43].

Given the practical merits of civic engagement in AI initiatives, at both the national and local levels, government agencies have started to experiment with public engagement in AI initiatives [19, 48]. While previous studies have outlined generic obstacles and challenges for civic engagement in AI initiatives [4, 15], it is important to note that marginalized communities often face additional challenges and lack adequate representation in the design, development, and assessment of AI systems [1, 19, 33]. Specifically, due to several reasons—such as the complexities of AI technologies and limited access to relevant resources—marginalized populations often face compounded challenges that hinder their ability to achieve the goal of meaningful participation in AI initiatives [39, 54]. Furthermore, considering that marginalized communities are often disproportionately harmed by the flaws in AI systems [17], their meaningful inclusion should be prioritized within the overall agenda for civic engagement in AI initiatives. Accordingly, to supplement and refine the approach to civic engagement in AI, more systematic knowledge and understanding of how to enable marginalized populations to inclusively participate in AI initiatives is essential.

Importantly, having trustworthy and inclusive channels for fostering civic engagement in AI for these marginalized communities is essential. Since marginalized populations with a shared history of neglect might harbor widespread mistrust of the government [2], supplementary avenues that can incorporate marginalized populations for engagement become critical. Public libraries are in a crucial position in communities, serving as trusted institutions where citizens can access knowledge in general and specific information about emerging technologies, as well as spaces that facilitate community collaboration and inclusion [9, 10, 18, 36]. This study, therefore, argues that public libraries can both provide knowledge about AI and foster inclusive civic engagement in AI initiatives. To understand how public libraries may play this role and include all types of individuals, including marginalized populations, this paper aims to explore two research questions: (1) How do public libraries foster inclusive civic engagement in AI initiatives for marginalized population through AI-related programs? (2) What are the benefits and challenges that public libraries face in promoting inclusive civic engagement in AI initiatives for marginalized population?

To address these research questions, we adopt a case study approach and analyze the case of the Queens Public Library (QPL) in New York City. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. In sections two and three, we briefly present existing literature on civic engagement in AI initiatives and the potential role of public libraries, respectively. Section four briefly describes the research design and the process of data collection. Section five introduces the background of our case study. Section six presents the preliminary findings based on interviews at QPL. Final comments and a discussion of the next steps are provided in the last section.

2. Inclusive civic engagement in AI initiatives

Civic engagement in AI initiatives is a strategy that provides several benefits when public agencies deploy AI systems that might impact citizens. These benefits include, but are not limited to, the enhancement of collective knowledge [4, 15, 31, 43], the fulfillment of public interests rather than companies' benefits [19, 32], fostering the inclusion of multiple stakeholders and marginalized communities [4, 28, 33, 38, 42], and establishing an accountable mechanism to evaluate the accuracy, interpretability, and unintended consequences of AI systems [7, 25, 52]. To secure and sustain these benefits, various nations and international bodies are actively developing ethical governance frameworks that promote civic engagement in AI initiatives across diverse sectors and disciplines [16, 48].

Nevertheless, to achieve the goal of meaningful participation in AI initiatives, stakeholders will face various challenges in the process of civic engagement, particularly those belonging to marginalized populations. One of the most prevalent issues underscored by previous studies is "participation washing," where marginalized populations risk being exploited and adversely affected by participatory approaches that occur not only within top-down structures but also in initiatives led by tech giant companies [20, 39]. Similarly, due to inherent power differential and a lack of supporting resources, a study focusing on participatory AI for LGBTQ+ populations found that participation might backfire—manifesting as mental health and exhaustion issues—if the practices cannot ensure safety, privacy, and accessibility for these groups [33].

Moreover, the second challenge faced by marginalized population is the lack of formal and safe network channels required for meaningful engagement. For instance, Gilman has critically argued that marginalized people are often destitute of opportunities to engage in traditional participatory mechanisms due to economic struggles, logistical hurdles such as inadequate transportation, and insufficient language access [19]. The limitations of accessing participation networks that originated in a Western context could pose a problem for including marginalized populations in the Global South, as a lack of access to global networks might disadvantage participants outside of Europe and America, further hindering their ability to engage meaningfully [33].

The third challenge is the knowledge gap between technical experts and marginalized populations regarding AI technologies [1, 19, 54]. Specifically, the varying levels of expertise in AI might undermine the collaborative and co-creation processes of AI initiatives, including the use of incomprehensible technical terminology and jargon, uneven baseline comprehension of the core principles of AI initiatives, and hesitancy to share ideas for fear of judgment from those with more expertise [54]. That is to say, the limited technical and scientific knowledge of AI could impose a significant burden on marginalized groups to engage in the design and development of AI initiatives.

Given these challenges marginalized populations might face in the process of participating in AI initiatives, scholars and practitioners have advocated for developing a concrete strategy and specific mechanisms to include those marginalized communities [5, 23, 33, 42, 51]. Functioning as trusted anchor institutions rooted in communities, this study argues that public libraries are in a unique position to facilitate specific mechanisms to foster inclusive civic engagement in AI initiatives. By providing a safe and judgment-free environment for engagement, offering the necessary educational resources, and facilitating dialogue within communities, public libraries are in an ideal position to empower marginalized populations for them to engagement in AI initiatives.

3. Public libraries and the inclusion of marginalized populations

Public libraries are often deemed crucial social institutions that not only enhance community cohesion but also strive for inclusion of marginalized populations, such as economically disadvantaged or ethnic minority groups [6, 28, 29, 44, 45]. To address the needs of marginalized communities, public libraries have developed and followed several strategies. First, with their mission of "Open to All," public libraries offer accessible infrastructure—both physical and cultural—to meet the diverse needs of marginalized communities, such as free access to digital resources and cultural programming [3, 24, 46]. Second, the professional development of staff and librarians constitutes another strategy to link marginalized groups with public libraries. Specifically, by enhancing their skills and cultural competency through training programs, staff and librarians become more attuned to the needs of marginalized communities, thereby enabling them to address these needs promptly [44, 45].

Further than addressing the needs of all individuals, prior studies have demonstrated that public libraries have the potential to facilitate inclusive civic engagement in various ways. For the broader community, public libraries provide government information to the community to encourage civic participation [27], serve as spaces for community dialogue [11, 12], and equip individuals with the skills necessary for information literacy [8]. For marginalized communities, scholars and

practitioners have argued that public libraries can contribute to equitable access for them in a digital age, such as by offering alternative materials to supplement standardized curricula that under-resourced communities may lack [6], or by providing sufficient, high-quality Internet-enabled devices that encourage self-sufficiency, participation, and collaboration [34].

Moreover, public libraries play the role of enabling diverse community members to engage in technology innovation, which aligns with the tenet of inclusive civic engagement in AI initiatives. For example, with a focus on urban immigrants, research found that public libraries could address the informational needs of urban immigrants by providing literacy skills and technology support, thereby contributing to the engagement of marginalized groups [37]. Similarly, in the context of tribal communities, a study has found that public libraries offer services tailored to the needs of multi-ethnic populations and help narrow the digital gap in under-resourced communities through digital skills training, technology access, and spaces for innovation [10]. By serving as a safe and open space and a knowledge hub with innovative environments for stakeholders, it is well documented that public libraries are becoming key agents in assisting citizens in pursuing lifelong learning and engaging in technology innovation [18, 21].

Parallel with the emerging attention on AI technologies, the discussion regarding how public libraries can help their patrons engage with this new trend of technological innovations is rising in tandem. Researchers have argued that public libraries could support the field of responsible and inclusive AI by providing users with access to information about data and algorithms [35], by gathering user feedback on AI implementation [22], and by offering programs that raise awareness and build competencies in AI [23]. However, extant research points out that there remains room for public libraries to target marginalized communities more closely, ranging from addressing their informational needs on AI to more actively cultivating their ability to engage in an inclusive AI agenda [23]. That is to say, public libraries could play a more pivotal role in advancing the agenda of inclusive civic engagement in AI initiatives.

Rooted in these arguments on inclusive civic engagement in AI initiatives and the role of public libraries in this agenda, we argue that public libraries have great, yet overlooked, potential to foster inclusive civic engagement in AI initiatives, particularly in empowering and integrating marginalized populations. A closer examination of public libraries' practices for inclusive civic engagement in AI could not only yield a deeper understanding but also generate practical suggestions for practitioners in the field of AI. As a result, this study employs a case study approach at the Queens Public Library to investigate how it fosters inclusive civic engagement in AI initiatives by offering AI-related programs. The next sections will outline the background of the Queens Public Library and the AI-related programs implemented there.

4. Research design

This study adopts a case study approach to explore the research questions through a qualitative and inductive lens of analysis. The Queens Public Library (QPL) was selected for three reasons: (1) in our prior review of best practice reports [23], QPL offers attractive AI-related programs that promote civic engagement and citizen education; (2) it serves a highly diverse region where marginalized populations constitute an important targeted audience; and (3) it provides relatively easy research access because QPL belongs to the Urban Libraries Council (ULC), one of our research project partnerships. To make a better sense of the background of QPL and its AI-related programs, this ongoing study first maps the profiles of AI programs at QPL and reviews essential documents outlining the initiatives that QPL has pursued, such as its AI-related events, strategic plans, and operational details. We also conducted a broader online search using the Google search engine with keywords such as "AI," "artificial intelligence," "machine learning," "robot," and "generative AI" alongside the library name. In doing so, we aimed to locate public reports, news articles, and other relevant documents, which provided additional background information on the case's AI activities and helped identify potential interviewees for the next stage of the study.

Based on the background of QPL and its AI-related programs, this ongoing study interviewed 15 library staff at QPL in order to delve into how these programs foster inclusive civic engagement in AI initiatives and what benefits and challenges they encounter when promoting inclusive civic engagement in AI initiatives. To gain a comprehensive perspective on this topic, interviewees represented both managerial and operational staff.

Each interview lasted around one hour and was recorded and transcribed for further analysis. The interviews followed a semi-structured format based on an interview guide covering the purpose of AI-related programs, the benefits, costs, and challenges of offering such programs, and potential strategies and considerations for civic engagement in AI initiatives. Using an inductive coding approach, one of the authors reviewed and coded the primary themes in the transcripts. Specifically, we maintained flexible and broad coding categories rooted in the interview protocol (e.g., the benefits and challenges of offering AI-related programs) and allowed the data to enrich and refine our conceptual understanding of these themes. The next section will briefly summarize the background of QPL as a case study, providing a contextual foundation for further analysis.

5. The context of Queens Public Library

The Queens Public Library (QPL) primarily operates in the Queens borough of New York City, which is characterized by a dense and highly diverse population. With 2.4 million residents, approximately 28% identify as Hispanic or Latino, 27% as Asian, 25% as non-Hispanic White, and 17% as Black or African American, reflecting a high degree of ethnic diversity in the area. Additionally, over 55% of residents speak a language other than English at home, with Spanish, other Indo-European languages, and various Asian and Pacific Islander languages being the most common.

Regarding the economic status of residents in the Queens borough, significant economic disparities exist within the community. The median household income is around $82,000; yet, about 13% of the population lives below the poverty line. In terms of education, approximately 35% of residents aged 25 and older have attained a bachelor's degree or higher. These figures reflect a complex socioeconomic landscape, where affluent enclaves coexist with areas of financial hardship and marginalized populations who might face persistent challenges. Considering the demographics of the population in the Queens borough, QPL is expected to play a vital role in supporting a community marked by both cultural diversity and varied economic challenges.

To achieve its goals of advancing literacy and lifelong learning in the digital era, QPL has recognized the potential for innovative digital services that improve user experiences and broaden accessibility. In its latest strategic plan (2018-2023), QPL proposes two strategic initiatives aimed at enhancing its digital offerings and technological accessibility. First, QPL launched various programs to enhance user access to digital resources, such as upgrading the library's website to streamline access to digital content and offering personalized recommendations for collections, programs, and services tailored to individual needs. Second, QPL focuses on expanding the availability of new technologies and electronic content. For example, sandbox sessions for hands-on experience with emerging technologies are offered in the library, along with specific programs for immigrant populations to engage with technology, audiobooks, and non-English language materials. Based on the background of the case, the next section will present the preliminary results that emerged from the documentary data and interview data.

6. Preliminary results

This section presents the preliminary results on how QPL contributes to fostering inclusive civic engagement in AI initiatives and the benefits and challenges of pursuing this goal. To respond to the two research questions in this study, Table 1 shows an overview of the strategies, benefits, and challenges of the QPL.

Table 1
Strategies, benefits, and challenges of fostering inclusive civic engagement in AI initiatives

Aspects	Overviews
Strategies	• Designing and marketing AI-related programs in multiple languages to ensure accessibility and inclusivity. • Incorporating course examples of racial and socioeconomic diversity to raise awareness among marginalized populations.
Benefits	• Empowering community members with educational information and evaluative skills on AI. • Advancing the library's educational mission and community support through inclusive AI programs.
Challenges	• Resource constraints limit the rapid expansion of AI-related programs across all branches. • Tailoring AI initiatives to meet diverse community needs is complex and time-consuming. • A lack of in-house AI expertise increases the costs of AI-related programs, necessitating comprehensive staff training.

Echoing QPL's vision of "We speak your language," the first strategy for the library to promote inclusive civic engagement in AI initiatives is to develop and market AI-related programs in a multi-lingual manner. Given the demographic diversity of the communities QPL serves, library staff are highly aware of the need to communicate effectively and tailor their messaging to ensure community members can access information about AI-related programs in an inclusive and accessible way. For example, in a series of workshops that introduce attendees to generative AI tools, particularly ChatGPT and Google Gemini, certain workshops are conducted in languages other than English, such as Mandarin Chinese and Spanish. With this multi-lingual strategy, QPL not only attracts populations whose first language is not English to engage in its AI-related programs, but also fosters a more inclusive environment that encourages broader participation across diverse cultural and marginalized groups. In doing so, these programs could ensure greater accessibility and inclusivity for marginalized communities, particularly those belonging to ethnic minority groups.

Furthermore, the second strategy to promote inclusive civic engagement in AI is to ensure that instances of racial and socioeconomic diversity are incorporated into the courses as learning examples or case studies. Taking the "We Are AI" program as an example, the courses explicitly discuss and explore the potential oppressions that algorithmic systems may impose on marginalized populations, using the case of child protection as an illustrative example. In doing so, marginalized populations could become more aware of and acknowledge that they might be impacted by algorithmic biases, thereby prompting them to actively get involved in the design, implementation, governance, and evaluation of AI systems. In other words, by specifically highlighting the stakes faced by marginalized populations in AI initiatives, QPL could raise awareness among these groups and encourage their proactive engagement in discussions about AI initiatives.

In terms of the benefits of promoting inclusive civic engagement in AI initiatives, such efforts offer significant advantages for both community members and the library. For community

members, through AI-related programs hosted by the library, QPL provides factual and accurate information about the development and usage of AI tools, thereby building citizens' capacity to evaluate outcomes generated by AI in various contexts. Based on credible and digestible information about AI, diverse community members can gain a better understanding of how AI technologies exert different implications and impacts on various aspects of their lives, as well as their potential benefits, limitations, and even risks. This informational foundation can serve as the knowledge base for citizens—and especially for marginalized populations—in further engaging with AI initiatives in a meaningful way.

On the other hand, for the library itself, offering inclusive AI-related programs enables QPL to fulfill its educational vision and mission while also garnering further support and acknowledgment from the community it serves. In QPL, community members often show great interest and active engagement in AI-related programs because of the relevance and timeliness of AI technologies. Aligned with the growing interest of patrons in AI, it is fair to argue that QPL is well-positioned as a public education center that offers evolving learning opportunities to diverse target audiences. Given that, QPL has become the route for patrons to learn and engage with emerging AI technologies, which further reinforces its role as a vital community resource for marginalized populations.

Challenges remain when QPL is promoting inclusive civic engagement in AI initiatives. First, as one of the largest public library systems in the United States, QPL has already designed and offered hundreds of programs to citizens every week. To accommodate the new demands of AI-related programs, the library inevitably faces resource constraints that limit its ability to expand these programs rapidly. Additional resources in terms of funding, infrastructure, and staff are noted by our interviewees as necessary to extend AI programs to most branches of QPL beyond the major ones.

Second, operating in a highly diverse region, QPL needs to meet different requirements from its varied user base. To respond to the diverse needs of the community, the library staff will collect feedback from various community groups and allocate appropriate resources and personnel to design customized courses and marketing strategies for patrons with varying degrees of AI comprehension, diverse cultural backgrounds, and language usage. However, this task is challenging and time-consuming, especially when it comes to designing and implementing AI-related programs, as these programs often need to cover different levels of information and basic knowledge.

Lastly, the lack of expertise in AI technologies poses significant challenges for QPL to ensure the success of AI-related programs that could benefit inclusive civic engagement in AI initiatives. For instance, staff changes or turnover in specific AI programs can result in a loss of knowledge and hinder the sustainability of these programs. Moreover, due to the lack of expertise in AI, QPL needs to invite expert instructors or guest speakers to offer these programs, which could increase not only tangible costs, such as honoraria fees, but also intangible costs, such as strains on collaboration and communication. As a result, it is vital for the library to develop unified and comprehensive training programs for librarians and staff members to enhance their expertise in AI.

7. Final remarks and next steps

This ongoing study found that public libraries can potentially play a pivotal role in engaging community members in AI initiatives by offering programs that not only raise participants' awareness of AI but also enhance their capabilities in using AI. More importantly, in the case of QPL, inclusive strategies for engaging marginalized populations are observed, along with some of the associated benefits and challenges that public libraries need to address. Building on these insights, one can fairly argue that public libraries can supplement the participatory approach of government AI initiatives, ensuring that marginalized communities—who often disproportionately suffer harm from the risks associated with AI systems—are informed and empowered in the design, implementation, governance, and evaluation of AI initiatives in the public sector.

Through a detailed examination of practices and AI-related programs in QPL, this study contributes to advanced the limited knowledge about inclusive civic engagement in AI initiatives [19, 32, 42, 48], as well as to understanding the critical role that public libraries play in the digital age [10, 18, 21]. Specifically, public libraries can continually act as the "third place" that facilitates community education, discussion, and even co-creation of AI-related initiatives. When fulfilling this goal, they face not only conventional challenges related to digital innovation, such as limited resources and staff expertise, but also unique challenges posed by the inherent uncertainties of AI, such as patrons' distrust of new AI technologies. Therefore, the strategies and practices of public libraries might be transformative in the era of AI. To address these practical challenges, practitioners should consider strategies such as collaborating with external partners, investing in staff professional development, and taking incremental steps to experiment with appropriate AI-related programs that best fit the needs of their communities.

As a single-case study, limitations exist in its generalizability and depth of contextual variation; therefore, a more comprehensive analysis of this topic is needed. Next, we will apply a comparative approach to examine multiple cases of public libraries in fostering civic engagement in AI initiatives in order to map the landscape and reveal the nuanced differences in the practices implemented by public libraries, the benefits they offer, and the challenges they might face. Moreover, this ongoing study might be limited by drawing its conclusions solely from the perspectives of library staff rather than from the perceptions of patrons and other community members. Therefore, in the next step, we will investigate the willingness of community members to engage in these civic engagement practices related to AI and the factors associated with their willingness. In doing so, we could draw implications for the topic of civic engagement in AI not only from the perspectives of public libraries but also from the experiences and viewpoints of community members.

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Declaration on Generative AI

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used ChatGPT, Grammarly in order to: Grammar and spelling check. After using these tool(s)/service(s), the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the publication's content.

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