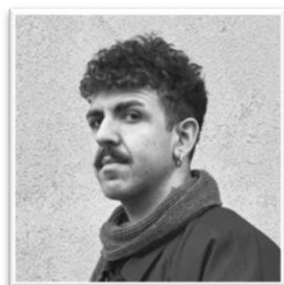
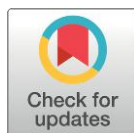


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From access to action: rethinking digital citizenship in public library platforms in the age of AI

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: In recent years, European public libraries have invested heavily in the digitalization of their services, developing digital lending platforms that expand access to reading and knowledge. However, these platforms not only organize content but also construct institutional discourses on what it means to be a citizen in the digital age. **Objective:** This paper critically examines the 2023/2024 institutional reports of three major public digital libraries — MLOL (Italy), eBiblio (Spain), and Gallica (France) — to explore how digital citizenship is discursively represented, regulated, or silenced in each case. **Methodology:** Through a comparative critical discourse analysis, the study investigates key linguistic and ideological patterns in the three reports. A comparative matrix was developed to examine dimensions such as discursive tone, user representation, time construction, and ideological functions. **Results:** The analysis identifies three implicit models of digital citizenship: patrimonial (Gallica), administrated (eBiblio), and participatory (MLOL). Despite their differences, all platforms fail to address digital inequality, user agency, or active participation in the design of digital services. **Conclusions:** The paper calls for a new sociopolitical vision of public digital libraries as inclusive, democratic infrastructures. In the Brazilian context, where no national cooperative digital library system currently exists, these reflections are especially relevant. With the rise of generative AI, public platforms must go beyond access and foster civic agency and digital empowerment.

KEYWORDS

Digital citizenship. Public digital libraries. Platformization of culture. Generative AI and public services. Discourse analysis in digital governance.

Do acesso à ação: repensando a cidadania digital nas plataformas de bibliotecas públicas na era da IA

RESUMO

Introdução: Nos últimos anos, as bibliotecas públicas europeias têm investido fortemente na digitalização de seus serviços, desenvolvendo plataformas de empréstimo digital que ampliam o acesso à leitura e ao conhecimento. No entanto, essas plataformas não apenas organizam conteúdos, mas também constroem discursos institucionais sobre o que significa ser cidadão na era digital. **Objetivo:** Este artigo analisa criticamente os relatórios institucionais de três bibliotecas digitais europeias — MLOL (Itália), eBiblio (Espanha) e Gallica (França) — com o objetivo de investigar como a cidadania digital é representada, normatizada ou invisibilizada nesses documentos. **Metodologia:** A pesquisa utiliza análise de discurso crítica e comparativa, com foco em

elementos linguísticos, narrativos e ideológicos presentes nos relatórios de 2023/2024. Foi construída uma matriz de comparação entre os três casos, destacando categorias como tom discursivo, representação do usuário e função ideológica do texto. **Resultados:** Os resultados revelam três modelos distintos de cidadania digital: patrimonial (Gallica), administrada (eBiblio) e participativa (MLOL). Todos, porém, evitam tematizar desigualdades digitais, exclusão social ou participação ativa dos usuários. **Conclusão:** O estudo destaca a necessidade de repensar as bibliotecas digitais públicas como espaços democráticos, especialmente no contexto brasileiro, onde ainda faltam políticas integradas. Com a chegada da inteligência artificial generativa, torna-se urgente refletir sobre plataformas públicas que não apenas ofereçam acesso, mas promovam agência cidadã.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Cidadania digital. Bibliotecas digitais públicas. Plataformização da cultura. Inteligência artificial generativa. Análise do discurso institucional.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The first half of the 2020s began with a sequence of global events that have profoundly reshaped the forms of collective life. Foremost among them were the Covid-19 pandemic, with its social, cultural, and political implications, and, starting in 2022, the emergence of generative artificial intelligence (Gen AI) across both public and private spheres, introducing significant shifts in social practices and imaginaries. Since the global release of ChatGPT by OpenAI, quickly followed by Meta's LLaMa, Google's Gemini, and Deepseek from China, generative AI has been consolidating its role as a defining force of the contemporary historical moment. As has always occurred at major historical junctures, it is social and technological transformations that prompt a rethinking of foundational concepts of democratic life. Among these, the concept of public participation is particularly central to the discussion this contribution seeks to develop.

As with other transformative historical junctures, these shifts in social and technological landscapes call for a re-examination of the foundational categories of democratic life. Among these, the concept of public participation emerges as both fragile and central. Public participation in AI is frequently reduced to symbolic or consultative gestures rather than processes that redistribute power or enable co-governance (Corbett et al., 2023). Most civic engagement around AI remains confined to the lower rungs, "informing" or "consulting", rather than advancing toward partnership or delegated authority (Corbett et al., 2023; Sieber et al., 2024).

Moreover, the ambiguity of both "participation" and "AI" as concepts further complicates the picture. AI technologies vary significantly in complexity, scope, and opacity, from chatbots and predictive analytics to deep learning systems whose internal processes are effectively inscrutable to the public (Sieber et al., 2024). Meanwhile, the notion of participation, already historically fraught, risks being instrumentalized or diluted. As Cornwall (2008) warns, participation has become an "infinitely malleable concept" easily reframed to serve institutional needs without real democratic substance.

1.1 Digitalization and Participation

In the current European context, participation is both a goal and a prerequisite for the digitalisation of public services. It is regarded as a guarantee of effectiveness, efficiency, and the legitimacy of public action. However, this vision is not without its ambivalences. On an operational level, digitalisation remains a fragmented process: there is still no unifying paradigm, no truly integrative platform capable of connecting centralised and local digital services. In response to this fragmentation, artificial intelligence is increasingly proposed as a technical and strategic resource capable of enhancing interaction between citizens and institutions.

According to Klarić (2024), key features of AI, such as adaptive learning and the ability to revise decisions in real time, can make the experience of digital services more seamless and accessible. Provided it is governed by ethical principles and designed with social awareness, AI has the potential to radically reshape the relationship between public administration and citizens, improving both transparency and accountability.

Yet to digitalise public services necessarily means to digitalise citizenship itself. The concept of digital citizenship, which emerged in the early 2000s, was initially defined as a set of technologically responsible behaviours (Ribble & Bailey, 2007). Today, it has evolved into a broader construct encompassing media literacies, cultural norms, identity formations, and practices of engagement and participation. Digital citizenship requires not only access to devices and connectivity, but also public education policies, infrastructural accessibility, and individual empowerment. It is a transformative process that intersects social inclusion,

information literacy, and civil rights. Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized that digital transformation in public institutions cannot be separated from civic transformation. As Gasco-Hernandez and Valle-Cruz (2025) argue, intelligent technologies in government create new opportunities and risks for democratic engagement, calling for renewed attention to transparency, inclusiveness, and co-governance. Similarly, Bono Rossello et al. (2025) propose an “architecture of collective intelligence” in which AI systems should enhance, rather than replace, civic participation. Within the context of public libraries, this implies rethinking digital infrastructures not only as tools of access but as environments that cultivate active, informed, and empowered citizenship.

1.2 Digital citizenship and Libraries

Within this landscape, libraries, and especially digital libraries, assume a strategic yet still underestimated role. Historically, libraries have constituted one of the few public spaces where access to knowledge, gratuitousness, and universalism converge. With the shift to digital society, libraries have also evolved, adapting to new media and emerging digital practices. Both IFLA and UNESCO (2022) reaffirm this function: libraries remain crucial environments for civic literacy, cultural co-production, and active participation.

It is within this context that public digital lending platforms have proliferated, particularly between 2020 and 2025. In Italy, MediaLibraryOnLine (MLOL) represents the main digital lending platform, accessible through public and school libraries. It offers ebooks, newspapers, music, audiobooks, and open access resources. Its model is non-commercial and based on lending, reinforcing a culture of sharing. It constitutes the digital extension of the public library, grounded in principles of access, inclusion, and knowledge as a common good.

In Spain, a comparable model is represented by eBiblio, coordinated by the Ministry of Culture in collaboration with the autonomous communities. Here too, the focus is on free and open access, with a shared bibliographic selection that is then adapted at the regional level based on local needs. Each community expands and customises its catalogue, offering a personalised service within a unified institutional framework.

In France, Gallica is the digital platform of the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), active since 1997. Initially conceived as an experimental laboratory, it has since become one of the largest digital libraries in the world. Unlike MLOL and eBiblio, it does not offer lending services but provides open consultation of millions of digitised documents, ranging from historical books and newspapers to photographs, manuscripts, and musical scores. Gallica is designed as a cultural archive for scholars, educators, students, and curious citizens, and it is grounded in an open and cooperative model.

These three platforms are not merely information services, but cultural interfaces through which digital citizenship is enacted—or, in some cases, constrained. MLOL, eBiblio, and Gallica exemplify three distinct public models of informational infrastructure and institutional mediation, each with its own approaches to governance, communication, inclusion, and participation.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The evolution from the Network Society (Castells, 1996) to the Connective Society (Rainie & Wellmann 2012), and more recently to the Platform Society (van Dijck, Poell & De Waal, 2019), marks a progressive deepening of mediation logics in everyday life. In the network phase, emphasis was placed on connectivity and information flow; the connective phase highlighted peer interaction and social coordination; and the platform phase has introduced new asymmetries of power, where algorithms and datafication shape not only communication but civic participation itself (Sorice, 2020). Public institutions—including libraries—now operate

within this platformized environment, where governance increasingly depends on infrastructures of mediation and metrics of visibility.

During the 1990s and 2000s, the concept of the digital library developed around a set of definitions and theoretical models that emphasised its hybrid nature. From Borgman (1993), who described it as both a network architecture and a set of services, to Marchionini and Fox (1999), who proposed a systemic model based on four dimensions (users, technology, services, and content) up to Arms (2000), who defined the digital library as an organised collection of digital information accessible via the internet. Crossing into the new millennium, Hoskins (2011) introduced the notion of the connective turn, identifying in the network a paradigm shift in communication. Today, we can speak of a true participatory turn in digital libraries, in which the digital does not erase the civic role of the library but rather rewrites it.

The risk of a “passivisation” of participation intensifies with the rise of platformisation. While the Network Society (Castells, 1996) described a world of connectivity, and the Connective Society (Wellman and Rainie, 2012) highlighted the social interactions within it, the Platform Society (van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal, 2019) reveals a new regime of mediation—one in which culture, knowledge, and public access are increasingly filtered through platform logics. Immediacy, profiling, and behavioural standardisation all contribute to transforming cultural consumption into a practice governed by metrics, automatism, and algorithmic recommendations.

This contribution builds on these premises to critically examine how the most recent reports (as of June 2025) published by MLOL, eBiblio, and Gallica stage or frame the notion of digital citizenship. Through a comparative analysis of their official narratives, the aim is to understand which models of participation emerge, what forms of exclusion are produced, and what implicit idea of the digital citizen is constructed within contemporary public library services.

Within the framework of digital mediation, platforms operate as socio-technical assemblages that do not simply facilitate access but actively shape users’ possibilities for expression and participation. This dual nature of platformization — simultaneously enabling access and reinforcing dependency — highlights its ambivalent democratic potential (Sorice, 2020). Platforms can expand participation, but they can also delimit it through subtle forms of algorithmic and institutional control. In this sense, digital citizenship cannot be understood outside the media interfaces through which it is exercised. Public digital libraries, as hybrid cultural infrastructures, mediate the relationship between individual agency and collective value, positioning users as both consumers and co-producers of knowledge.

| 5

3 METHODOLOGY

This study focuses on a critical documentary analysis of the three most recent reports published by MLOL, eBiblio, and Gallica. It draws on the theoretical and methodological framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), particularly as developed by Fairclough (1992; 1995) and Wodak & Meyer (2009), in order to investigate how library institutions construct and communicate their vision of citizenship through the textual and graphic choices found in the selected reports. The analysis proceeded through three interrelated phases: document contextualization, linguistic-semantic coding, and interpretative synthesis. Each report was subjected to a detailed close reading aimed at identifying recurrent lexical patterns, rhetorical strategies, and implicit ideological framings. Analytical categories were progressively refined throughout the process, in accordance with Fairclough’s relational model of CDA, which links textual structures to discursive practices and broader sociocultural contexts. The analysis focused on the introductory and executive sections of the reports, where institutional narratives and user representations are most explicitly articulated.

The selection of these three cases is not merely geographical but sociological. Each

case was chosen as an emblematic manifestation of how different welfare regimes and media systems mediate the relationship between public institutions and citizens in the digital age: Gallica reflects a heritage-oriented and institutional model; eBiblio exemplifies a bureaucratic and managerial conception of citizenship; MLOL embodies a civic and participatory approach rooted in community networks. Together, they illustrate how different welfare traditions and governance cultures shape the meanings and practices of digital citizenship across Europe, revealing a spectrum from administrated to participatory public infrastructures.

The reports - entitled “Report MLOL 2024: Dati e tendenze della lettura digitale in biblioteca”, “eBiblio. Informe estadístico 2024”, and “BnF. Rapport d’activité 2023” - document the activities of three major European digital lending platforms. These platforms have been selected as case studies not only for their national relevance, but also because, despite institutional and discursive differences shaped by their respective sociopolitical and cultural contexts, they share certain structural and ideological traits that may suggest the emergence of a broader European pattern in the conceptualisation of digital libraries. All three are publicly funded or institutionally anchored: Gallica is directly managed by the Bibliothèque nationale de France; eBiblio is coordinated by the Spanish Ministry of Culture in collaboration with the autonomous regions; and MLOL operates as a public-private partnership, with content and services provided by participating Italian public libraries, while the technical infrastructure is developed and maintained by the private company Horizon srl.

Figure 1. Covers of the analyzed institutional reports



Source: official reports from MLOL, Spanish Ministry of Culture and Bibliothèque nationale de France.

The decision to analyse their most recent reports is grounded in the CDA perspective that institutional documents are not neutral or merely informative texts, but rather discursive devices that produce and reproduce ideologies, representations, and models of citizenship. In this sense, CDA offers a suitable approach for exploring the relationships between language, institutional power, and society.

According to Fairclough’s classic formulation (1995), Critical Discourse Analysis operates across three interconnected levels: (i) linguistic-textual analysis, (ii) analysis of discursive practices, and (iii) analysis of the broader sociocultural practices within which texts are embedded. This dialectical-relational approach enables the researcher to identify how institutional texts produce and naturalise configurations of power, value systems, and seemingly neutral semantic relations. CDA, therefore, goes beyond “reading” the content of a text—it seeks to deconstruct its ideological and performative logics, highlighting what is said, how it is said, and crucially, what is left unsaid or rendered invisible.

The adoption of this approach also responds to an epistemological concern aligned with the nature of the phenomenon under study. Public digital lending platforms are not merely technical infrastructures; they are discursive and cultural technologies, presenting themselves to the public through reports, infographics, narratives, values, and rhetorical strategies. Understanding how these platforms represent themselves in their official documents means engaging directly with the institutional visions of digital citizenship that they implicitly or explicitly promote.

Each report was examined at both textual and paratextual levels. This included not only written language but also visual and graphic elements (layout, typography, infographics) that contribute to meaning-making. The analysis focused on lexical recurrence, modality, and agency markers—linguistic features that reveal how institutions construct social actors and roles. To reduce subjectivity, coding was performed iteratively by cross-checking categories across the three reports, allowing recurrent linguistic and semantic patterns to emerge from comparison.

Based on these premises, a tailored discursive analysis grid was developed as an intermediate methodological tool bridging theory and comparative analysis. The aim of the grid was twofold: first, to provide a structured framework for analysing the reports; and second, to ensure systematic and coherent identification of the key discursive dimensions across each document, thus allowing for meaningful comparative interpretation. The construction of the grid drew on key literature in Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Janks, 1997; Wodak & Meyer, 2009) and translated analytical categories into observable textual dimensions. The grid was structured into seven main sections:

- a) **Dominant discursive tone:** identifies the prevailing linguistic register (e.g. technocratic, value-oriented, emancipatory, self-celebratory) and its communicative function.
- b) **Representation of the user as citizen:** analyses how the report constructs the ideal recipient (passive, active, consumer, participant).
- c) **Key terms and ideological lexicon:** records recurring words and key concepts that convey a particular vision of the service and the citizen.
- d) **Discursive agents:** identifies the main subjects within the text (institutions, platforms, citizens, partners) and the type of agency attributed to them.
- e) **Temporal framing:** examines how time is constructed in the discourse (present, memory, future) and its rhetorical function.
- f) **Omissions and silences:** highlights what is left unsaid yet remains relevant (e.g. inequality, vulnerable groups, lack of participatory design).
- g) **Interpretive conclusion:** summarises the implicit vision of digital citizenship emerging from the text.

This grid allowed for a systematic yet critically interpretive engagement with the texts. It was not applied rigidly, but rather used as a flexible guide, capable of capturing both overt discursive patterns and more subtle symbolic structures. Upon completing the individual analyses using this discursive framework, a comparative matrix was constructed to align the three platforms across the same analytical categories. This comparative step enabled the identification of both convergences and divergences across Gallica, eBiblio, and MLOL in relation to:

- the underlying model of governance (top-down, multi-level, hybrid);
- the construction of the user (active citizen vs passive consumer);
- the presence or absence of participatory logics;
- the form of digital citizenship legitimised (access-based, user-oriented, or framed as cultural commons).

The comparative matrix served as a critical synthesis tool, not only to map empirical findings but also to generate theoretical inferences regarding the symbolic role these public platforms play in shaping the digital public sphere. In particular, the analysis revealed that, despite differences in language and organisational structure, the three platforms converge around several key elements: a lack of participatory design, a selective vision of citizenship, an

emphasis on quantitative data, and a marginal engagement with inequality beyond its statistical registration. These shared traits provide a solid empirical basis for critically interrogating the relationship between the digitalisation of public services, citizenship, and the institutional production of discourse.

In summary, the methodological approach adopted in this study rests on a coherent articulation between critical discourse theory, operational textual analysis tools, and comparative synthesis. This integration is necessary to grasp the symbolic and political complexity of the digital transformation as communicated through the reports and public documents of the selected cultural services.

4 RESULTS

The discursive analysis of the three reports published by MLOL, eBiblio, and Gallica reveals three distinct models of public digital library infrastructure, each staging significantly different visions of citizenship, culture, and participation. These visions are not directly stated in the documents but can be inferred through the discursive form, narrative structure, keyword selection, and symptomatic silences. A key divergence emerged in the tone and communicative approach across the three cases.

The Gallica report, authored and published by the Bibliothèque nationale de France, adopts a highly institutional and technocratic register, aimed at legitimising the central role of the institution in managing and enhancing cultural heritage.

The eBiblio report, produced by the Spanish Ministry of Culture, employs a managerial and administrative language, characteristic of a performance-monitoring document rather than a cultural narrative.

In contrast, MLOL frames its discourse in explicitly value-driven and reflective terms, at times bordering on manifest-like rhetoric. The lexicon includes references to the **common good, public infrastructure, sharing**, and the **reader-citizen**, invoking a more overtly political and cultural imaginary.

However, this rhetorical distance does not always correspond to actual differences in participatory models. Upon closer examination, all three reports display a shared limitation: user participation is rarely addressed in substantive terms. Citizen agency is weak, if not entirely absent. There is no mention of public consultations, co-design processes, or deliberative feedback. Users are not interviewed, nor are they represented as political or social actors. Instead, they are discursively constructed as end-users, positioned at the terminus of a top-down informational system; recipients rather than co-creators.

In Gallica's case, this dynamic is reflected in the emphasis on heritage and preservation. The user is framed as a passive consumer of "high culture" content, placed in the role of explorer, reader, or viewer. Interaction is unidirectional. There are no categories addressing emerging practices, creative appropriation, or collective agency. Paradoxically, one of the world's largest digital libraries produces a discourse that renders real citizens, their competencies, and their needs invisible.

eBiblio operates within an even narrower framework. Citizenship is reduced to managed userhood, regulated by a multi-level governance system involving ministries and autonomous communities. The only metric that matters is the number of loans and the efficiency of service delivery. The discourse is fully functionalist, and the user is depicted as abstract, serial, and interchangeable. The entire discursive architecture is designed to showcase the system, not the citizen. Culture here appears as a standardised service, not a space for expression or social differentiation. There is no room for conflict, marginality, or cultural heterogeneity.

MLOL, as already noted, attempts to construct a more civic and collective narrative around digital reading. The library is portrayed as a cultural and political space, and the platform

as a public infrastructure positioned in contrast to commercial logics. Within this context, the user is framed as a “reader-citizen,” invited to participate in a shared culture. However, even in this case, an ambivalence emerges: the citizen evoked by the discourse is already present, already literate, already aligned with the project. This figure is more ideal than real. The report does not address friction, barriers to access, digital inequalities, or tensions between technical competencies and cultural participation. In this sense, the proclaimed universalism risks concealing an implicit selection: the digital citizen is only he or she who already knows how to navigate the platform. This idealisation is not a technical oversight, but a discursive effect typical of the platformisation of public services. As van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2019) have observed, the platform is not merely a technical interface but also a narrative and normative device that generates expectations, behaviours, and models of citizenship. In the analysed reports, public digital platforms act as environments that select, standardise, and direct. They do not simply enable access: they define the proper way of being a citizen within the digital sphere.

Another transversal element concerns the temporality of the discourse. In the Gallica report, time is linear: from foundation to growth, each stage confirms institutional excellence and continuity. In eBiblio, time is bureaucratic, governed by budget cycles and performance measurements. Only MLOL introduces a more open and projective temporal dimension: the future is not predetermined, but something to be constructed through public and cultural responsibility. Still, even here, the “future” remains an evocative horizon, rather than a concretely articulated space of participatory policy-making. From a sociological perspective, these three models may be interpreted as explicit manifestations of implicit visions of the digital public good:

- **Gallica** represents a **heritage-centralist model**, where digital technologies serve cultural dissemination without challenging existing power relations;
- **eBiblio** embodies a **managerial-rationalist model**, focused on service efficiency and uniformity, with low symbolic intensity;
- **MLOL** proposes a **cooperative-cultural model**, aimed at building shared meaning and civic belonging, albeit with a risk of idealisation and limited engagement with social realities.

All three, however, systematically avoid engaging with questions of inequality, marginality, or digital divide. The digital citizen represented is always compliant, embedded within an implicit normality. There is no trace of class, gender, or cultural capital tensions. Digital citizenship, in these reports, is never problematised as a social construction but is instead presented as a status already achieved, or naturally achievable, through public service provision.

In conclusion, what these institutional documents reveal is not only the current state of digital library platforms in Europe, but more profoundly, what public institutions expect from the digital citizen, and how they are actively contributing to defining, regulating, and operationalising that figure. This is the critical issue this analysis seeks to foreground: public digitalisation is not neutral, and every platform also operates as a form of governance. Digital citizenship is not merely a right to be exercised, but a role to be performed. What is conspicuously missing from these reports is precisely this: space for variation, resistance, conflict, and subjectivities that do not fit neatly into predefined categories.

Quadro 1. Comparative Discourse Analysis

| Categoria | Gallica (France) | eBiblio (Spain) | MLOL (Italy) |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|--|
| Dominant discursive tone | Technocratic, value-based, self-congratulatory | Technocratic, managerial | Value-based, managerial, emancipatory |
| Representation of the user/citizen | Passive user, cultural heritage consumer | User as service endpoint | Active and participatory reader-citizen |
| Keywords | Collections de presse, Territoires, Intelligence Artificielle, Responsabilité sociétale des organisations (RSO) | Préstamos, Usuarios, Títulos, Comunidad Autonomas | Lettura, Digitale, condivisione, ecosistema |
| Main discursive actors | BnF, Gallica, institutional partners, users | Ministry, Autonomous Communities, platform, users | Libraries, readers, publishers, schools |
| Temporal construction | Linear past-present-future | Managerial present | Past-present-future with collective agency |
| Ideological function of the discourse | Legitimizing national cultural leadership | Performance measurement of the service | Participatory construction of digital culture |
| Critical/omitted elements | Complete absence of user agency, no mention of inequalities | Abstract user, no social dimension, no consultation | Idealization of literate user, missing 'non-users' |
| Conception of digital citizenship | Citizenship as access to cultural heritage | Citizenship as managed service usage | Citizenship as cultural and collective practice |

Source: This table is based on a qualitative discourse analysis of the 2024 reports of MLOL and eBiblio, and of the 2023 report of Gallica. The analysis was conducted using a structured interpretative framework.

5 DISCUSSION

In an article published on Medium.com in September 2019 (Blasi, 10 September 2019), Giulio Blasi - CEO of Horizons Unlimited, the company that developed and manages the Italian digital lending platform MLOL - posed a timely question about the digitalisation of library communication. He argued that the level of communicative digitalisation still to be achieved involved a different set of challenges, from rethinking spatial configurations to the management of content, data, and procedures, all with the aim of preserving and transmitting the idea of the library as integrated access to culture and knowledge (Blasi, 2019). This article began by highlighting the strong connection between the digitalisation of public services (cultural and beyond) and the digitalisation of citizenship, asking how, through the words and data in their official reports, three European public digital library services frame digital citizenship - and what these narratives reveal (or fail to reveal) about the actual margins of citizen participation.

The discursive analysis of MLOL, eBiblio, and Gallica reports has brought to light implicit visions of digital citizenship, revealing both analogies and divergences among the three European cases at a time when libraries, like other public institutions, are being reshaped as platforms. Rather than being explicitly discussed, citizenship emerges as a performative discursive form, constructed implicitly through language, assigned user roles, silences, and the categories used to describe access, service, and culture.

A first critical axis concerns the divergence between rhetorical models and the levels of agency afforded to users. In France, Gallica, with its institutional and heritage-based tone derived from its position within the BnF, constructs the image of the citizen as a passive heir to

a collective memory that must be safeguarded. The subject engaging with the platform is not a citizen defined by spatiality, temporality, or sociality, but a functional, cultured, universalised figure, devoid of tension, conflict, or diversity. The imagined user is assumed to be fully aligned with the digitalisation project, almost a form of heritage citizenship, where value lies not in the subject's agency but in their regulated access to a pre-established symbolic good.

In Spain, eBiblio takes this logic even further, adopting a managerial discourse in which the citizen is largely represented as the endpoint of a centrally coordinated, locally implemented infrastructure, structured according to the specific features of Spain's autonomous regions. The underlying logic is quantitative; the core values are universality and efficiency. Cultural citizenship here is administered, not enacted. Participation, involvement, or dialogue are absent. The user is treated as a variable within public management.

On the opposite end of the spectrum lies MLOL. Its report adopts a value-laden, reflective, and culturally oriented discourse. Here, the user is not just a consumer but is addressed as a "reader-citizen," a dual figure reflecting an evident attempt to construct the platform as a common good, a public and cooperative space, an alternative to commercial models. In this scenario, digital citizenship is linked to reading as a practice of belonging, agency, and meaning-making. However, this figure is highly idealised: the user is already literate, already active, already integrated into the platform's dynamics. The report does not address those who are excluded, those who lack access, or those not integrated into the digital and cultural literacies necessary for participation.

As van Dijck (2020) points out, even public platforms can reproduce exclusion when they fail to confront structural inequalities. In this sense, all three reports reveal a shared blind spot: they never problematise the digital divide, sociocultural barriers, or differences in digital capital (Bourdieu, 1986; DiMaggio et al., 2004). The risk is that digital citizenship is constructed through a process of normalisation - if not exclusion - by exclusively representing the digitally integrated, literate user, while rendering the rest effectively nonexistent within both discourse and service design. In fact, every institutional discourse is also a practice of exclusion: what is left unsaid, what is made unthinkable, is just as significant as what is explicitly articulated.

With regard to the temporality of discourse, none of the three reports approaches time as a process of collective learning. Rather, time is treated as a linear sequence or a measure of performance. Only MLOL introduces a projective vision of time, though still in rhetorical terms, where the future is evoked but not operationalised. None of the reports adopts a logic of participatory accountability: there are no documented consultations, forums, or co-design processes. The resulting image is of a closed platform temporality, not open to change.

Ultimately, the comparison reveals that these institutional documents operate not only as communication tools but also as mechanisms of cultural normativity. Citizenship is shaped through the very mechanisms of the platform society described by van Dijck, Poell, and De Waal (2019), who argue that platforms do more than provide digital infrastructures - they shape what is considered public and civic. In this sense, even digital libraries, despite their self-proclaimed distinctiveness, are not exempt from platform logics. This raises a broader set of questions about what kind of public platform public institutions aim to create: one that merely delivers content, or one that involves citizens in shaping the rules, criteria, and objectives?

The platformization of public services thus represents a double-edged transformation. On one side, it enables efficiency, interoperability, and data transparency; on the other, it embeds new asymmetries of power, algorithmic biases, and dependencies on proprietary infrastructures. This ambivalence defines what Sorice (2020) calls the paradox of connective participation, where the promise of inclusion coexists with mechanisms of subtle exclusion. In the context of digital libraries, this tension manifests in the coexistence of open-access rhetoric and limited participatory governance, revealing that public digital infrastructures often reproduce the same platform logics they claim to counterbalance.

A truly participatory platform cannot be reduced to a user-friendly interface or a vast catalogue accessible on demand. To be genuinely participatory, it must be a political environment, one in which users not only access content but also directly contribute to defining what counts as culture, access, and the public. In practice, this vision would require that reports also include the voices of users and librarians - who, after all, reflect the realities of the territories they serve - thus marking a shift from performance-based to dialogic and reflexive reporting. To enable this shift, it is crucial first to develop new metrics that measure equity and social impact, not just numbers of loans, and to create digital deliberative or consultative spaces tied to the platform's ongoing evolution.

Future implementations could explore participatory design methods or data ethics frameworks to align platform architectures with civic engagement goals.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The digitization of public library services has emerged as a central development in the reconfiguration of cultural access and civic engagement in Europe. This shift has accelerated over the past five years, not only in response to the pandemic but also due to the widespread adoption of digital infrastructures and the increasing role of generative artificial intelligence (Gen AI) in public life. Public digital libraries represent a unique field in which institutional values, technological mediation, and civic imaginaries intersect. This study aimed to investigate how the concept of digital citizenship is articulated, or omitted, in the institutional reports of three leading European digital library platforms: MLOL (Italy), eBiblio (Spain), and Gallica (France). The goal was to critically examine how these platforms frame the relationship between citizens and public digital services in a time of platformization and algorithmic governance.

Using a comparative critical discourse analysis, the research analyzed the language, structure, and rhetorical devices in the 2023–2024 activity reports of the three platforms. A comparative matrix was constructed to identify discursive models, user representations, and implicit ideological orientations.

The findings reveal three distinct discursive models of digital citizenship: Gallica promotes a patrimonial model rooted in cultural heritage; eBiblio adopts an administrative and data-driven framework; MLOL proposes a participatory model centered on access and shared cultural value. Despite their differences, all three reports avoid addressing issues of digital inequality, algorithmic mediation, or participatory governance.

The user is often constructed as compliant and passive, with little room for contestation or co-decision-making. Public digital libraries are not neutral platforms; they are cultural infrastructures that shape - and are shaped by - broader societal visions of democracy and participation. While often celebrated for expanding access, these platforms also carry the risk of reproducing exclusion and limiting agency, especially when participation is defined only in instrumental terms. In light of the rise of Gen AI, the need for transparent, accountable, and democratically governed digital public services is more urgent than ever. The comparative analysis demonstrates that these narratives already contain the seeds of such civic experimentation, suggesting that platform design can be an instrument of democratic renewal.

In this sense, the reflections offered here may also serve future development in other contexts (such as Brazil, in which we can find a decentralised approach to digital libraries rooted in the administrative reform known as the “citizenship turn” promoted by economist, social scientist, and former Finance Minister Bresser-Pereira) where the lack of a national, cooperative digital library infrastructure opens both a gap and an opportunity: to build inclusive, civic-oriented platforms from the ground up.

Ultimately, digital citizenship must be understood as a mediated practice — shaped by the interfaces, infrastructures, and discourses through which institutions communicate with their publics. Public digital libraries are therefore not only sites of access but arenas where mediation itself becomes a form of citizenship: moving “from access to action” means reimagining digital citizenship as a shared political project—one that restores the public dimension of technology, making platforms not only spaces of service delivery but arenas of democratic co-creation.

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