

# Librarians bridging the digital divide: Experiences from Finland

Emmi Lehtinen, Seppo Poutanen & Anne Kovalainen

**To cite this article:** Emmi Lehtinen, Seppo Poutanen & Anne Kovalainen (18 Dec 2023): Librarians bridging the digital divide: Experiences from Finland, Journal of Access Services, DOI: 10.1080/15367967.2023.2292210

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/15367967.2023.2292210>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.



Published online: 18 Dec 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)






View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Librarians bridging the digital divide: Experiences from Finland

Emmi Lehtinen , Seppo Poutanen , and Anne Kovalainen 

University of Turku, Turku, Finland

## ABSTRACT

In various countries, public libraries play a crucial role in supporting citizens' access to public online services. In Finland, libraries provide both traditional library services and digital support to help customers access their personal bank accounts and health records. However, the impact these new support demands on librarians' expertise and work remains understudied. To address this gap, we interviewed 21 librarians, exploring their experiences in providing digital access services. Qualitative thematic analysis of the transcripts revealed four situational dimensions of digital care work, which encompasses ethical and emotional aspects. We also recommend some best practices for digital access services.

## KEYWORDS

Digital care; digital society; emotional labor; ethics; finland; libraries

## Introduction

Finland is a highly digitalized Nordic welfare state in which the capabilities to use digital devices and services are essential for everyday life and active citizenship. It has the highest rate of digital technology usage and skills in the European Union (European Commission, 2022). Universally offered public services are predominantly digital, requiring online registration and the use of applications accompanied by digital bank statements. Citizens can access government services such as taxation, pension benefits, passport offices, and police officials digitally, with limited in-person options. Official online identification is typically facilitated through online banking IDs, which are mainly used for daily banking activities such as bill payments. Thus, public and commercial online services are interconnected, necessitating citizens to possess basic digital skills to utilize digital public services.

In extensively digitalized and equity-based societies such as Finland, citizens with lower digital skills must receive adequate support and

---

**CONTACT** Anne Kovalainen  [anne.kovalainen@utu.fi](mailto:anne.kovalainen@utu.fi) 

© 2023 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

opportunities to access digital devices and services. This is especially important when an overwhelming majority of public services are mainly or solely dependent on digital access. While policies at the highest level have outlined the importance of digital support for every citizen, the practical implementations and specific avenues for obtaining digital support are not explicated or clearly defined. Very importantly, service providers, such as social insurance institutions and banks have shifted their operations to digital platforms, and in-person services have been reduced or diminished. The *Public Service Info* provided by the Digital and Population Data Services Agency operates only via the Internet and telephone, making it challenging for individuals with limited or non-existent digital skills to access these services or use them effectively.

The need for digital access services is relatively new, and while there are no institutions specializing in providing digital support in Finland, citizens often seek assistance from libraries. Public libraries are located in every municipality and offer their customers free access to digital devices, such as computers (Libraries.fi, 2023). With extended opening hours, public libraries cater to people from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. They are perceived as neutral and easily accessible places for obtaining help with digital devices and services. The extensive network of libraries throughout the country enables easy access to the majority of the population within a short distance. Furthermore, many municipalities organize free shuttle buses to libraries for those living in remote areas, thereby securing convenient access to library services.

International research shows that in many countries, the access services of public libraries include formal and informal support with digital devices and online services for their patrons (Ali, Naeem, & Bhatti, 2021; Bertot, Real, & Jaeger, 2016; Dowdell & Liew, 2019; Giesler, 2017; Hammock et al., 2023; Kaun & Forsman, 2022; Leguina, Mihelj, & Downey, 2021; Sefyrin, Gustafsson, & Wihlborg, 2021). Research reports from highly digitized countries such as Sweden and the USA have shown that it is easier to obtain support to access digital public services from public libraries than from the actual public service providers in question (Giesler, 2017; Kaun & Forsman, 2022; Sefyrin et al., 2021).

In Finland, public libraries are integral to civil and welfare society, serving as crucial information and knowledge mediators within the institutional framework. Libraries play a central role to access digital services by enhancing the digital skills of citizens and providing digital support (Labor Union Jyty, 2023; Libraries.fi, 2022; Ministry of Finance Finland, 2023). Libraries are legally defined to promote versatile literacy, societal dialogue, and knowledge acquisition for all citizens (Finlex, 2016). Many libraries include repositories of online sources and materials along with physical books and

encyclopedia, for example. Provision of access to online books and electronic media such as informational films and documentaries, falls under typical digital services or libraries. With the increased digitalization of societal services, citizens require advice and support in navigating these digital resources. Advice, support and help, for example with access to digital services by other institutions and often with customers' own devices, includes often such digital care work that does not fall into customary digital information support services provided by librarians but represents support for accessing digital services, the amount of which has risen with the overall digitalization of society.

The expanded role of digital support for citizens offered in public libraries by librarians and experts working in libraries involves additional care work, which exceeds conventional library responsibilities and entails ethical considerations and emotional labor (Kaun & Forsman, 2022; Sefyrin et al., 2021). However, the specific role of librarians as digital support providers for citizens in Finland remains ambiguous. There is limited research examining how librarians experience and adapt their expertise to this expanding work role. This study aims to address this gap by examining librarians' experiences in providing digital support as a part of libraries' access services, and the challenges they encounter.

The objective of this study is to recognize, differentiate, and clarify the key aspects and challenges pertaining to librarians' practices and expertise in digital support. For that purpose, twenty-one thematic interviews are conducted with librarians throughout Finland regarding the contents, challenges, successes, and ethical questions related to digital support. The data is analyzed through the lens of *digital care work*, a theoretical concept that encompasses work practices extending beyond library work expertise. This study adds the concepts of *emotional labor* and *ethical aspects* to the analysis. The results provide societally valuable information on the new central roles, challenges, and expertise of librarians and public libraries regarding digitalization and digital inclusion in developed societies.

## Literature review

### ***Digital Support provided by public libraries expands librarians' expertise***

Public libraries provide various types of access services for patrons to help them find and utilize information resources, and those services change with societal changes (see Ali et al., 2021; Bertot et al., 2016; Giesler, 2017; Hammock et al., 2023; Kaun & Forsman, 2022; Sefyrin et al., 2021). Owing to digitalization, one type of a relatively new library service is digital support, which helps patrons access different digital devices and services.

These objectives are likely to expand the scope of librarians' work and expertise beyond conventional library responsibilities.

In the literature, the concepts of digital divide, digital literacy, and digital inclusion are primarily used in relation to digital accessibility. The digital divide describes the unequal distribution of resources required to use digital services, including devices, skills, knowledge, and the motivation to use them (van Dijk, 2012). Previous research in Finland has identified age and education as significant factors influencing access to online services (Elena-Bucea, Cruz-Jesus, Oliveira, & Coelho, 2021; Heponiemi et al., 2020). Additionally, older citizens, individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and those with major health issues tend to have fewer skills and abilities to use digital services, resulting in reduced benefits from digital social and healthcare services compared to younger citizens in higher societal positions (Heponiemi et al., 2020). This disparity deepens the unequal accessibility of online citizen services for vulnerable citizens. The concept of digital inclusion encompasses efforts to decrease the digital divide and ensure equal access to digital services (Jaeger, Bertot, Thompson, Katz, & DeCoster, 2012).

International research recognizes the central role of librarians in promoting digital inclusion. Bertot et al. (2016) found that public libraries in the USA provide support, for example, in using computers and databases, online government services and forms, and by assisting people with applying for jobs online. Similarly, in the UK, public libraries decrease inequality by increasing the digital capital of their customers and providing support with online public services and job searches (Leguina et al., 2021). In the USA and Canada, public libraries provide essential digital opportunities for homeless people (Dowdell & Liew, 2019; Giesler, 2017; Richter et al., 2019).

Librarians' objective behind providing digital support is to enhance the digital literacy of customers and assist them in navigating a digitalized society (see Bertot et al., 2016; Kaun & Forsman, 2022; Sefyrin et al., 2021). In Finland, public libraries are legally mandated to enhance versatile literacy, of which digital literacy is one dimension (Finlex, 2016; Ojaranta & Litmanen-Peitsala, 2019). The concept of digital literacy overlaps with that of digital divide. Various skills and knowledge are needed to thrive in a digitalized society, such as using devices and digital interfaces, but also understanding digital information, communication, and operation of digital society and organizations, which form different facets of the digital divide (Jaeger et al., 2012; Martin & Grudziecki, 2006). The knowledge and skills required to survive and thrive in a digitalized society also depend on the lives and personal goals of citizens (Martin & Grudziecki, 2006). As the broad definition of the concept of digital literacy illustrates, the content and demand for digital support provided by libraries can vary.

Finland's Council of Public Libraries highlights the variability in customers' needs. The Council's recommended skills for librarians include general usage of mobile devices and applications, understanding of information security and literacy, algorithms, and the operation of digital services (Libraries.fi, 2022). These requirements illustrate how the digital support provided by libraries expands librarians' expertise in digital devices and services (see also Labor Union Jyty, 2023). These pressures are global: Research in Sweden and the USA indicate that customers with fundamental digital problems require more elaborate support than just help with technical difficulties, and these forms of support include care work and social support (Giesler, 2017; Hammock et al., 2023; Kaun & Forsman, 2022; Sefyrin et al., 2021).

### ***Conceptualizations of Care Work, Emotional Work and Ethical Dilemmas at Work***

Hammock et al. (2023) found that librarians in the USA advised their customers on various health and social needs beyond their expertise, such as mental and physical health problems, health insurance issues, technological literacy, and unemployment. Accordingly, librarians provide social support to customers, regardless of the issues they handle (see also Giesler, 2017). Hammock et al. classified the different levels of social support provided by librarians into informational, instrumental, and emotional types. In addition to providing information to customers, librarians provide instrumental support by, for example, advising them on technology usage and emotional support by listening to their concerns.

In Sweden, Sefyrin et al. (2021) and Kaun and Forsman (2022) found that librarians' work has expanded beyond their expertise in library science and informatics to include care work in customer relations owing to digitalization and the provision of digital support. Care work also includes ethical considerations because customers' daily lives depend on technology and librarians' support (Sefyrin et al., 2021). Kaun and Forsman emphasized the emotional aspects and labor related to the digital work of librarians. They further analyzed librarians' work by introducing the concept of digital care. They define it as "digital work involving emotional aspects," which "aims to help with everyday tasks and practices that users of digital services are expected to perform" (Kaun & Forsman 2022, p. 11). The concept of social support (e.g., Hammock et al., 2023) aligns closely with Kaun and Forsman's definition of care work, particularly regarding the emotional aspects of digital support provided in libraries.

Theories of care have defined care as an emotional state, activity, or a combination of both (Bubeck, 1995; Thomas, 1993; Tronto, 1998). Most

definitions also emphasize activities related to fulfilling the needs of someone crucially dependent on the actions of the caregiver (Bubeck, 1995; Daly & Lewis, 2000; Tronto, 1998). Owing to asymmetrical power relations, the care relationship is inherently ethical and includes normative considerations (Tronto, 1998). Customers' dependence on the digital support provided by librarians evokes ethical considerations regarding, for example, customers' security of information, personal data, and bank transactions (see Kaun & Forsman, 2022; Sefyrin et al., 2021), which is also acknowledged in Finland (Digital and Population Data Service Agency, 2023).

Thus, emotional aspects and emotional labor are central to providing care (Bubeck, 1995; Hochschild, 2012; Kaun & Forsman, 2022; Thomas, 1993; Tronto, 1998). In addition to the emotional and sympathetic feelings evoked in care situations emphasized by care theorists (Bubeck, 1995; Daly & Lewis, 2000; Thomas, 1993; Tronto, 1998), care work also includes emotional labor. Hochschild (2012) defined emotional labor as the management of feelings in social situations. Emotional labor refers to adjusting one's feelings and managing their expression for other people and taking responsibility for the emotions of others (Hochschild, 2012). Digital support situations may evoke different emotions but also require emotion regulation and adjusting to the customers' expressed emotional register as part of emotional labor. Kaun and Forsman (2022) found that librarians confront emotional challenges and contradictions while supporting customers in vulnerable and dependent positions. Librarians also recognize their responsibility toward customers' needs and are emotionally engaged in assisting customers. Simultaneously, librarians are required to professionally regulate and balance their own emotions by performing emotional labor (Kaun & Forsman, 2022).

Owing to the extent of digitalization of welfare and citizen services, citizens in vulnerable positions and with poor digital skills are likely to seek help from and depend on the digital support provided by public libraries. The objectives of digital support in decreasing the digital divide, increasing digital inclusion, and enhancing versatile digital literacy are transforming librarians' expertise and demands regarding access services. Similar to Sweden, digital support in Finnish libraries may include aspects of digital care (Hannula, Tapio, & Tapio, 2012; Labor Union Jyty, 2023; Lehtinen & Poutanen, 2023). This type of digital support evokes different emotions and involves librarians in emotional labor and ethical considerations. Digital support provided by librarians, whose customers are crucially dependent upon and which customers cannot possibly manage alone, should be defined as digital care work, in addition to conventional customer service (Bubeck, 1995; Kaun & Forsman, 2022; Tronto, 1998).

## Methodology

### *Data collection*

Finland is divided into 309 municipalities, each hosting several libraries, indicating extensive library coverage across the country (Libraries.fi, 2023). Administratively, Finland is divided into nine large geographic areas, covering the whole country and its 309 municipalities. We contacted all the directors of the main public libraries and requested them to identify two to four librarians responsible for providing digital support. Seven of the nine directors responded and named 25 potential interviewees, who we contacted. The directors suggested potential interviewees by informing libraries of the study at hand, and asking for those interested in participating to provide their contact details.

To follow the ethical code of conduct and implement our research procedure, when dealing with a relatively small number of interviewees suggested by persons higher up in organization (i.e., directors), communication with the library directors only concerned the original request regarding the potential informants from their library county. The directors and other managers were excluded from any further information and the following steps in the research, including the number of persons invited to interviews, and number and names of the consenting participants. The library directors did not receive information on those who agreed/disagreed to participate in the interviews, nor did they receive any information regarding the interview themes and questions, or whether researchers contacted the persons proposed by directors or not.

These 25 librarians represented various areas and regions of the country. However, four of the contacted 25 librarians did not respond to the interview requests, resulting in 21 librarians available for the interviews during November–December 2022. The interviewees represented 20 libraries from 18 municipalities in different parts of the country. The librarians interviewed held various positions and educational backgrounds, ranging from flexible and part-time workers to information specialists. They consisted of five men and 16 women, aged between 25 and 63 years. All interviewed provided informed consent. In the analysis presented here we will not distinguish the gender of informants because the number of informants, especially male informants, was relatively small and in order to maintain anonymity. The maintenance of anonymity was one of the reasons why group interviews were not conducted.

The guiding thematic framework for the interviews was constituted to establish the nature of digital care work, as well as the ethical and emotional aspects identified in the literature review. The interview topics included their experiences with work content, digital support content,

challenges and successes in digital support, and ethical considerations. The research framework was assessed using an ethical consideration process prior to data collection. The librarians interviewed received the questions discussed prior to the interviews, but it was emphasized that considering their answers in advance was entirely optional.

Thematic interviews were conducted online via Zoom or Teams meetings in November and December 2022. The sessions were audio recorded and transcribed by the project researcher. The interviews were conducted in Finnish and translated in English by the research group, with minimal edits in grammar to enhance the clarity of the text, while ensuring that the interviewees' sentiments and opinions become faithfully represented. The average duration of the interviews was one hour, with variation ranging from 30 to 90 min.

### ***Data classification and analysis***

Thematic data analysis was conducted in two phases by a project researcher and two senior researchers. In the first phase, interview transcripts were coded by a researcher to construct thematic categories. To ensure triangulation, each researcher reviewed and discussed the coding individually and as a team, and seminars and possible differences discussed to ensure logical categorization of themes. Guided by the literature, three thematic categories were distinguished from the materials. The preliminary thematic categories were named as follows: “technical care,” “ethical issues in digital support,” and “emotional aspects in digital support, including emotional labor.”

In the second phase of the analysis, categorizations were further analyzed and refined through discussions among all team members to ensure the logical consistency and credibility of the analysis. All citations highlighting the customers' dependence of the librarian in the digital support situations were identified and categorized as “digital care work” and included in the final analysis. The category of “technical care” was identified as being a prerequisite for all types of digital care and support situations and was therefore excluded from the final categorization of the interview materials. The final categorization consists of two overarching categories, namely “ethical aspects in digital support” and “emotional aspects in digital support.” Both encompassing categories cover the varieties and nuances described and experienced by librarians in digital care situations experienced by librarians in their work practices. The depth of the ethical and emotional aspects varied among the experiences of librarians, resulting in four combined thematic categories, which are presented in [Table 1](#). All interview material analyzed in the second phase fell into these situational dimensions. The resulting categories were four-fold: emotionally

**Table 1.** Categorization of the dimensions of digital care.

	Emotionally non-binding digital care	Emotionally binding digital care
ethically non-problematic digital care	17 citations	52 citations
ethically problematic digital care	26 citations	34 citations

nonbinding and ethically nonproblematic situations, emotionally nonbinding but ethically problematic situations, emotionally binding but ethically nonproblematic situations, and emotionally binding and ethically problematic situations (Table 1).

## Results

The research results align with the findings of other studies showing that librarians' expertise and work content have expanded toward social support and digital care work (Giesler, 2017; Hammock et al., 2023; Kaun & Forsman, 2022; Sefyrin et al. 2021). Providing digital care in digital support situations requires librarians to meet customers' technological inabilities. Several ethical considerations and emotional aspects of work are encountered in actual work situations. In the following sections, the specific work situations experienced by librarians are analyzed in detail to show the complexity of both emotional work and the possible ethical dilemmas faced in the situations where the digital care is performed in the access services.

### *Emotionally and ethically non-problematic digital care in libraries*

Librarians experience technically demanding and highly time-consuming interactions with customers requiring assistance with the basic use of digital devices and services. For customers, it may be difficult to articulate the type of digital problems they have, and often the definition of the problem is done through dialogue, with the support of librarians. The questions asked by the librarians in these interactions also indicate the type of digital problem the customer may have.

It is important [to understand] what concepts to use, and whether the customer understands them. Also, to speak fluent Finnish, instead of using English idioms or words, as words such as "Wi-Fi" or "a wireless network" can be difficult or tricky for many to understand ... You have to show and describe those things as much as possible and proceed in a very practical way. (Interviewee 15, Zoom transcript, p. 108.)

They [customers] have to be advised in detail and very precisely; for example, some people do not know how to log in to the online bank at all, and they have to be instructed on how to do so. They may come every few weeks, and every time you have to show [them] how to log in. (Interviewee 04, Zoom transcript, p. 23.)

As the above interview excerpts show, some customers may ask for help with the same digital issues regularly, relying on librarians' continual access assistance. The access assistance may range from necessary services such as access to bank account or health records to recreational use such as ordering and paying for the items in online shops. In these situations, technical assistance with digital devices and access may be rather straightforward.

This kind of dependence regarding the use of digital services essential for everyday life indicates the type of digital care work by librarians that exceeds the usual work-related tasks (see Bubeck, 1995; Kaun & Forsman, 2022; Poutanen & Kovalainen, 2023; Tronto, 1998). However, these access service situations do not require librarians' commitment to any specific emotional issues, nor do librarians find ethical dilemmas concerning the customers' requests even though they perceive these access service requests mostly as technically and possibly pedagogically demanding.

Customers ask for support while using the devices offered by libraries but also with their own devices such as tablets and mobile phones. Private banking IDs are used for access identification in most if not all online public services in Finland. These interconnections between different services and service providers may be challenging to explain to and instruct customers.

They [customers] have acquired a digital device, which is most often a smartphone, and they should get along with it, but they do not, and then they ask about it... But they do not understand how the screens or the different apps, etc. operate. It is difficult to explain the screens and apps and their functions. For example, different webpages: how to open them, what to do, and how to move from one material [screen display, webpage, or app] to another? And how long different apps stay open, for example. I'd say that we have created this kind of hassle because of digitalization. (Interviewee 12, Zoom transcript, p. 81.)

Additionally, these types of support situations demand both knowledge and understanding of the operations of digital public services available at different Government agencies such as Social Insurance Institution in general. Sefyrin et al. (2021) have recognized similar issues related to complex and unstable relations between different digital service providers and users.

### ***Emotionally non-binding but ethically problematic digital care in libraries***

The thematic analysis revealed specific ethically demanding access situations that differ from the previous, emotionally non-binding and ethically non-problematic situations. Librarians described these ethically problematic issues as consisting of several interactions in which they dealt with possible gray area of ethical rules and regulations concerning privacy in access.

First, we have a principle that we do not actively do it, it is the customer that always uses the devices themselves [when logging into their own online bank account]. This is a very strong principle in all our digital support situations. Sometimes there can be

exceptions though; for example, if the customer is physically unable to do so, then we can help with the login, [e.g., by entering the personal digital access code to the bank account]. But this is temporal and done in exceptional cases. (Interviewee 07, Zoom transcript, p. 45.)

Of course, sometimes you find yourself in a gray area, and it is up to you to decide the best alternative. (Interviewee 12, Zoom transcript, p. 84.)

These situations are so different that it is difficult to create the same general [ethical] guidelines [for all cases] on how to handle them. (Interviewee 21, Zoom transcript, p. 155.)

Librarians describe how the limits of digital support, defined by ethical guidelines, are subtle and sometimes challenging to follow in practice in various interaction situations between librarians and customers. This finding is similar with the findings of Sefyrin et al. (2021) in Sweden, and indicates the need for further training and mutual consideration of practices in various ethical situations that librarians may confront while providing digital support.

Librarians also recognize their responsibilities in relation to customers and actively consider the consequences of their actions for both customers and themselves. These findings highlight librarians' power position in relation to customers. The unequal power positions are typical in care work (e.g., Tronto, 1998). In particular, librarians' own security in terms of possible future legal actions have not been identified in previous studies.

My colleagues have been asked [by customers] about information security issues, whether this or that site is safe, whether virus protection of the device is in order, etc. However, when one is not an expert in the field or has not received training in that matter, it is difficult to provide an absolute answer. (Interviewee 15, Zoom transcript, p. 109.)

Customers can be harmed by giving advice without knowing the matter, so I try to avoid that. (Interviewee 15, Zoom transcript, p. 107.)

In principle there could even be legal consequences [against me] after I have advised someone to do this and that [when registering to bank account], and if money would be lost from the account, or there is a bad deal or something else wrong with the online bank account... So, [in the library access services] we really have to stick to the fact that we do not do that [use customer's personal bank account access codes, even if given to us by the customer]. (Interviewee 13, Zoom transcript, p. 90.)

Despite the ethically problematic situation, the librarians did not experience specific emotional issues or emotional distress during these work situations. This may be due to the fact that these types of access service situations are overwhelmingly technical in nature; for example, how to access specific service, operate devices, and navigate the complexities of the access area in question. The clarity of guidelines on how to deal with technical questions and personal data seemed to shield employees from

emotional distress even if the service situation was related to sensitive issues, such as access to online banking.

### ***Emotionally binding but ethically non-problematic digital care in libraries***

Many of the issues discussed by the librarians during the interviews relate to human interaction and ways to deal with customers' service needs regarding digital access problems, but sometimes these interactions were used as pretext to talk to a person, and for example, get support or acceptance by somebody more capable. Interviewees describe digital care situations that are emotionally challenging or positively binding and meaningful.

Customers may very often apologize for having poor digital skills and show emotions such as sadness over their poor skills. I have said many times that it's not a sign of stupidity if you are just not used to them [digital devices]. (Interviewee 09, Zoom transcript, p. 60.)

At digital support, you get such a good feeling [at work]; I think that it is rewarding customer service. Usually, the problems are solved and the customers are very gratified ... It shows that it is so difficult to get help [in general in these issues], and the relief is so great when the problem is resolved well; that the matter was taken care of. (Interviewee 15, Zoom transcript, p. 108.)

Thus, there may be very large effects. Of course, for every resolved problem, satisfaction and gratitude and that kind of positive atmosphere are present. (Interviewee 07, Zoom transcript, p. 50.)

The access to digital services in these customer service situations was not necessarily problematic, and human interaction received more emphasis than technical access. Oftentimes, the librarians empathized with the customers by placing themselves in their situations.

Even if human interaction is an integral part of the access service in general, it also may carry emotionally binding elements. In addition to the sympathetic feelings that digital care situations may evoke in librarians, they are also required to perform emotional labor, such as taking care of and regulating their own and customers' emotions in digital support situations (see Hochschild, 2012).

I try to resolve situations so that customers have positive feelings. (Interviewee 05, Zoom transcript, p. 31.)

When you see that another person is stressed, you have to stay firmly on the matter, stay calm, maintain a friendly face and control your own temper. (Interviewee 17, Zoom transcript, p. 122.)

I try to take [the service to an agitated or stressed] person a little more holistically. (Interviewee 18, Zoom transcript, p. 131.)

I have come across a couple of situations where I had to walk on eggshells a bit to calm the situation down. (Interviewee 21, Zoom transcript, p. 152.)

The findings resonate with those of Kaun and Forsman (2022), who showed that emotional demands for librarians were considered as being a part of their work. However, the analysis of the interview materials of this study reveals the reciprocal nature of the service situation on the one hand, and the complexity of the emotionally binding service situations in librarians' work on the other.

The emotional dimension in the customer service situations can be rewarding both to customers and library employees, which can increase librarians' personal fulfillment and job satisfaction (see Sewell & Gilbert, 2015). However, for employees the aspects of control and management of emotions (emotional labor) that are present in the access service situations, are part of the professionalism. Management and control of emotions entangle with other complex aspects related to access services, as the following categorization of the service situations unfolds.

### ***Emotionally and ethically problematic digital care in libraries***

Digital care situations can be highly complex in many ways, and emotional and ethical considerations can be intertwined. Librarians described in the interviews how informing the customer about the ethical limits for digital support evokes emotions and requires emotional labor. Ethical guidelines that relate to most general rules and regulations concerning data privacy of individuals (GDPR act) are perceived as contradicting librarians' possibilities and aims to help customers. Sometimes, communication barriers may add complexity.

There are really difficult situations [When you have to say that I am not really allowed to help with this matter] ... Surprisingly, the private banks direct their own customers to us, and even the city staff [municipal agencies] may also direct their own customers to the library to get advice. These are difficult situations [if customers are with a burning deadline of loan payment or some other emergency case] ... These are often emotionally laden situations, and even aggressive behavior can emerge in these situations. (Interviewee 13, Zoom transcript, p. 91.)

The interconnections between ethical and emotional issues have a reciprocal effect. Librarians' descriptions indicate that emotional commitment and empathizing with the customer's situation can make the strict adherence to ethical guidelines challenging and subject to situational variation.

I am one of those people who want to take care of things to the end, even though in some cases I have certainly acted against official instructions [and data privacy act], but I have not profited from it financially or memorized anyone's personal login information [to benefit from it]. (Interviewee 02, Zoom transcript, p. 14.)

What do you do with that grandma who comes one hour before closing time, and she really has an emergency, so what do you do, what then, do you have the heart to

send her away, or really help her if you can? (Interviewee 13, Zoom transcript, p. 96.)

It feels really dull to say that go away, and then she cannot pay her bills and is sanctioned for that; she has no one to help, so what do you do? ... This is a small town, and people know each other; if there are people who come often and we know little about their life situation, we will help. However, if you feel that it is a bit obscure, then you can say that I will guide you only until you can log in yourself to your bank account. (Interviewee 14, Zoom transcript, p. 98–99.)

Furthermore, librarians describe situations that are emotionally binding and simultaneously require ethical consideration of the consequences and limitations of their responsible power positions related to customers and their privacy.

When giving advice, you notice that this is an elderly person stepping into an online scammer trap. What should be done? At least I warn, but what if she still wants to send the information anytime, do I refuse to help or even prevent, can I do so, and maybe I cannot? (Interviewee 17, Zoom transcript, p. 124.)

There is a certain type of social work we perform at the same time. I always try to go back to those computer problems and away from the family and illness problems the customers wish to tell you about, but they easily, ... when a lonely person comes for access service, I do listen even if I would not like to do so, and they want to tell. So, it is also a moral problem in a sense. (Interviewee 18, Zoom transcript, p. 134.)

The analysis reveals that digital support situations discussed in this category are also the most challenging ones for librarians to handle, both emotionally and ethically. In these customer situations, the librarians must simultaneously regulate their own reactions, emotions and possible sympathetic feelings of care, and actively make ethical decisions, on which the customers are crucially dependent.

## Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that while the digital services offered expands, so does the requests for digital support among the population that is not digi-native or fully capable with digital devices. As the public digital support in Finnish public libraries expands the scope of the libraries' access services, librarians' responsibilities also increase. Owing to the digital divide, customers with limited digital skills and knowledge depend on the support provided by librarians. The analysis of interview data revealed that librarians provide care in digital support situations that can be emotionally and ethically demanding. This finding is consistent with that of recent research on care work by librarians in Sweden and the USA (Giesler, 2017; Hammock et al., 2023; Kaun & Forsman, 2022; Sefyrin et al., 2021). Drawing on theories of care

(Bubeck, 1995; Thomas, 1993; Tronto, 1998) and relating it to situational digital access service met by librarians in their customer work, this study highlights the situational variations in librarians' experiences of the ethical and emotional aspects of their digital care work, illuminated through four thematic categories.

The first thematic category encompasses librarians' experiences of digital care work itself. Many customer situations are not seen as emotionally or ethically problematic, but rather, as requiring extensive knowledge and technical skills. The descriptions of customers' needs for support with the use and understanding of digital devices and online services confirms that their role in promoting citizens' digital literacy goes beyond their formal work descriptions (e.g., Martin & Grudziecki, 2006). In addition to the technical and pedagogical skills required, they need to acquire knowledge of the citizen services provided by other public institutions, in order to support customers in digital care situations. This expansion of the required knowledge beyond libraries' own service scope has also been noted in other studies (Giesler, 2017; Hammock et al., 2023 in the US case; Kaun & Forsman, 2022 in the Swedish case).

The second thematic category in the analyses encapsulates those digital care situations which are perceived by librarians as ethically problematic but not emotionally binding. While the Finnish government has drafted ethical guidelines for digital support (Digital and Population Data Service Agency, 2023), the practical implementation and adaptability to changing situations pose challenges. As recognized before by Giesler (2017), the common and general-level policies and guidelines may be challenging to follow in practice, especially in situations that require care. Librarians describe "grey area" as situations in which exceptions are made, necessitating active ethical consideration and assessment of the situation in question. Furthermore, librarians recognize their responsibilities and their position of power over customers, as well as the consequences of digital support for both parties. These findings illustrate the ethical nature of digital care work in libraries (Tronto, 1998), as noted by Sefyrin et al. (2021).

The analysis further raised two specific types of service situations in which emotional labor played a major role. In the third thematic category discussing the emotional aspects and emotional labor, emotional labor related to digital care work was regarded as meaningful and rewarding and often included empathizing with customers. In addition to the emotional commitment to helping customers, librarians also perform emotional labor, which is typical for care work (see Hochschild, 2012). These findings are consistent with those of previous research on the emotional aspects of care work and social support provided by librarians (see Giesler, 2017; Hammock et al., 2023).

The fourth thematic category emphasized the emotional labor and problematic situations that also involved ethical dilemmas. This category of digital care in our analysis brought forward those experiences and situations that were both emotionally binding and ethically problematic. Following ethical guidelines can contradict librarians' emotional commitment to helping customers, resulting in complicated feelings. Additionally, communicating the limits of digital support to customer in service situations requires librarians to perform emotional labor (see Hochschild, 2012). The applicability of ethical guidelines becomes situationally variable owing to the emotionally experienced obligation to help customers, drawing on librarians' personal life experiences, which have also been recognized by Giesler (2017). Our findings imply that although the ethical and emotional aspects of digital care work provided may be perceived separately (see for example Hammock et al., 2023; Kaun & Forsman, 2022; Sefyrin et al., 2021), in most cases, emotional engagement and ethical considerations are intertwined and cannot be separated.

The findings of this study support the society-centric and expanding role of libraries previously recognized in mainly in the Swedish and American contexts (Giesler, 2017; Hammock et al., 2023; Sefyrin et al., 2021). Libraries are perceived as a neutral place, where equality is encouraged and customers from vulnerable positions may feel more welcome than in other public spaces. While other societally central institutions such as banks, tax office, and health services are closing down their on-site, in-person services, libraries remain easily accessible places with long open hours (see also Giesler, 2017). For some customers, libraries may be the only places to get help, which is also recognized by librarians and increases the emotional and ethical burden of their work.

Libraries are crucial institutions enabling the extensive digitalization of public services by preventing citizens from succumbing to the digital divide. These new roles elaborate the scope of libraries' access services and librarians' work regarding digital care by requiring them to face emotional and ethical challenges. While there are no sanctioned or obligatory rules on how to confront various situations with customers in practice, librarians must develop informal practices based on their experiences. This emphasizes the importance of the ethical integrity in librarians' everyday work, as shown in our analysis. As Sefyrin et al. (2021) and Kaun and Forsman (2022) have pointed, digitalization requires care work. When other responsible institutions fail to provide such care work, librarians become the go-to persons discharging emotional labor while confronting ethical challenges. However, the practicalities and demands of such care work are often unrecognized in society, and librarians lack training regarding their expanding roles.

### ***Limitations and directions for future research***

Our study's interviewees were sampled from libraries in both large cities and small rural areas across Finland to ensure variability among the interviewees. However, even if the interviewees represent the entire country, the total number of librarians interviewed was relatively small. It is noteworthy that our qualitative study aligns with recent research from other Nordic countries and the United States, focusing on similar developments and expansion in librarians' digitalized work. The burden of emotionally and ethically complex customer situations is an especially important research subject, as it intersects with the digitalization of public services, digital literacy and the well-being of librarians as workers as well as citizens as fully enabled members of society, a topic prominent for Nordic countries. This calls for further detailed analysis of the evolving nature of librarians' work, and scaling of the possible best practices.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

The analysis of librarians' work experiences in customer access services demonstrates that owing to the digitalization of most public services and the rise of online private services, the variety of access services provided by libraries is expanding. This is especially true for highly digitalized countries such as Finland, in which the public sector is expected to solely rely on digital services in the future instead of offering localized in-person services. This development matches the patterns of the private sector. The growth of digitalization in the society underscores the importance of ensuring that all citizens are well-informed about digital services and their accessibility. In many countries, public libraries and their personnel have taken on the responsibility of providing practical information and assistance, acting as a grassroots-level providers of digital access and support service for citizens. This adds a new dimension to the librarians' work profile.

Traditionally, librarians are seen as experts in enabling customers to access various information resources within their own realm of expertise. In the present-day digitalized society, these access services also require librarians to widen their knowledge base, ranging from supporting customers in accessing their personal bank account details for availing banking services, online taxation, or income benefits, to accessing their digital medical and health records and digital services at pharmacies. All these services are essential for everyday life; however, access to these services is not adequately or at all supported in any institutions except for libraries. In addition, some customers are crucially dependent on the digital support provided by librarians. The increase in digital services in society results

new pressures, emotional burden, ethical challenges, and unforeseen workloads for those experts who govern the digital access services but not necessarily the complexity of digital society as a whole.

The findings of this study reveal that the digital support provided by librarians extends well beyond traditional library work and its information tasks, and encompass what can be labeled as digital care work. Digital care work includes emotional and ethical elements that intertwine with digital support interactions in several ways. Most of these interactions are situational and require in-person assistance. This study distinguishes four categories of digital care work that illustrate the relationships between the emotional and ethical aspects of digital support work. All four forms of digital care work impose different burdens on librarians, emphasizing the need for a more detailed consideration of the complexity of their tasks in libraries. Digital care work exceeds the conventional expertise and work requirements of librarians, and there is currently a lack of specific training in this area. Therefore, librarians usually trust their own life experiences and common sense in assisting customers with various digital services and information requests that range from mobile banking support to assistance with digital applications for social benefits, passports, or completing annual taxation forms. Digital care, with its complexity and interactivity, can be both emotionally and ethically demanding, particularly when customer requests exceed the usual forms of digital support.

From the point of view of social justice and judicial rights of citizens, the service situations where the online privacy of patrons and legal protection of both patrons and librarians become jeopardized, are highly problematic. In light of our results, the institutional and/or organizational stakeholders have not offered practical solutions for improving those service practices where violations of the data protection act may take place. The grey area of practices, the 'state of affairs' is probably due to many factors, and relies on the good work ethics of librarians. Other influencing factors extend from the scarcity of budgets of the Finnish public sector, to the vulnerability and scant resources of those citizens to whom library sometimes literally is the last hope. Opportunities to helpfully re-organize concrete work practices vary from library to library, but generally, and based on our research results, training and counseling concerning ethical and emotional issues in digital care work are recommended for librarians, in order to maintain the best practices in the future services.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by the University of Turku Rector Grant.

## Notes on contributors

*Emmi Lehtinen* is Master of Social Sciences in economic sociology and doctoral researcher in sociology and project researcher at TCLS at the School of Economics, University of Turku, Finland. Her current research focus on the social structures and digitalization in work, and social networks in labor markets.

*Seppo Poutanen* is Senior Research Fellow at the University of Turku, Finland. He has published in the areas of epistemology, sociology of health and illness, social theory, science and technology studies, gender studies and sociology of work & economy. Currently Dr. Poutanen is interested in how logics and practises of digital platformization are taking different sectors of public government in Finland and other societies – potentially to the extent that a new form of social order can be seen to be emerging.

*Anne Kovalainen* is professor in entrepreneurship at the University of Turku, Finland, School of Economics. She researches contemporary forms of work in platform economy, rise of the entrepreneurial university, professionalism and entrepreneurship, and changes of work in the new platform economy. Among her latest books are coauthored books with Dr. Seppo Poutanen (2023, 2020, 2017) and edited volume with Prof. Steven P. Vallas (2019) *Work and Labor in the Digital Age*. Emerald, and two qualitative research method books by SAGE (2016, 2008).

## ORCID

Emmi Lehtinen  <http://orcid.org/0009-0004-1578-7931>

Seppo Poutanen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3287-1850>

Anne Kovalainen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2044-0348>

## References

- Ali, M. Y., Naeem, S. B., & Bhatti, R. (2021). COVID-19 working from home (WFH): Library services and librarian experiences. *Journal of Access Services*, 18(3), 212–223. doi: 10.1080/15367967.2021.1976193
- Bertot, J. C., Real, B., & Jaeger, P. T. (2016). Public libraries building digital inclusive communities: Data and findings from the 2013 digital inclusion survey. *The Library Quarterly*, 86(3), 270–289. doi:10.1086/686674
- Bubeck, D. E. (1995). *Care, gender, and justice*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press
- Daly, M., & Lewis, J. (2000). The concept of social care and the analysis of contemporary welfare states. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 51(2), 281–298. doi:10.1111/j.1468-4446.2000.00281.x
- Dowdell, L., & Liew, C. L. (2019). More than a shelter: Public libraries and the information needs of people experiencing homelessness. *Library & Information Science Research*, 41(4), 100984. doi:10.1016/j.lisr.2019.100984
- Digital and Population Data Service Agency. (2023). Ethical Guidelines for Digital Support. Retrieved from <https://dvv.fi/en/ethical-guidelines-for-digital-support>.
- Elena-Bucea, A., Cruz-Jesus, F., Oliveira, T., & Coelho, P. S. (2021). Assessing the role of age, education, gender and income on the digital divide: Evidence for the European

- Union. *Information Systems Frontiers*, 23(4), 1007–1021. doi:10.1007/s10796-020-10012-9
- European Commission. (2022). *The Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI)*. Retrieved from <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/desi>.
- Finlex. (2016). *Laki yleisistä kirjastoista* [The act of public libraries]. Retrieved from <https://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/ajantasa/2016/20161492>.
- Giesler, M. A. (2017). A place to call home?: A qualitative exploration of public librarians' response to homelessness. *Journal of Access Services*, 14(4), 188–214. doi:10.1080/15367967.2017.1395704
- Hammock, A., Pandolfelli, G., Samuel, T., Fils-Aimé, P., Grande, M., D'Ambrosion, M., & Scott, L. B. (2023). Understanding how suburban public librarians respond to the health and social needs of communities. *Library & Information Science Research*, 45(1), 101217. doi:10.1016/j.lisr.2022.101217
- Hannula, T., Tapio, M., & Tapio, R. (2012). *Käytsä täällä usein? Käyttäjätutkimus Turun pääkirjaston käytöstä* [Do you come here often? User research of the usage of Turku main library]. Turku: Turun kaupunginkirjasto. [https://www.kirjastot.fi/sites/default/files/content/Loppuraportti\\_K%C3%A4yts%C3%A4%20t%C3%A4%C3%A4ll%C3%A4%20usein\\_asiakastutkimus\\_1.pdf](https://www.kirjastot.fi/sites/default/files/content/Loppuraportti_K%C3%A4yts%C3%A4%20t%C3%A4%C3%A4ll%C3%A4%20usein_asiakastutkimus_1.pdf).
- Heponiemi, T., Jormanainen, V., Leemann, L., Manderbacka, K., Aalto, A. M., & Hyppönen, H. (2020). Digital divide in perceived benefits of online health care and social welfare services: National cross-sectional survey study. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 22(7), e17616. doi:10.2196/17616
- Hochschild, A. R. (2012). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Jaeger, P. T., Bertot, J. C., Thompson, K. M., Katz, S. M., & DeCoster, E. J. (2012). The intersection of public policy and public access: Digital divides, digital literacy, digital inclusion, and public libraries. *Public Library Quarterly*, 31(1), 1–20. doi:10.1080/01616846.2012.654728
- Kaun, A., & Forsman, M. (2022). Digital care work at public libraries: Making Digital First possible. *New Media & Society*, 24, 146144482211042. doi:10.1177/14614448221104234
- Labor Union Jyty. (2023). *Jytyn kirjastoalan kysely 2023 – tulokset* [The librarysurvey 2023 of Jyty – The results]. Retrieved from <https://jytyliitto.fi/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Jytyn-kirjastoalan-kysely-2023.pdf>.
- Leguina, A., Mihelj, S., & Downey, J. (2021). Public libraries as reserves of cultural and digital capital: Addressing inequality through digitalization. *Library & Information Science Research*, 43(3), 101103. doi:10.1016/j.lisr.2021.101103
- Lehtinen, E., & Poutanen, S. (2023). Kolumni: Digineuvonta on myös hoivatyötä [Column: Digital support is also care work]. *Kirjastolehti*, 116(3), 5–6. <https://suomenkirjastoseura.fi/kirjastolehti/kolumni-digineuvonta-on-myoos-hoivatyota/>.
- Libraries.fi. (2022). *2019 YKN Suositus digitaidoista ja digituen antamisesta kirjastoissa* [Finland's Council of Public Libraries 2019: The recommendation of digital skills and digital support]. Retrieved from [https://www.kirjastot.fi/neuvosto/digitukisuositus?language\\_content\\_entity=fi](https://www.kirjastot.fi/neuvosto/digitukisuositus?language_content_entity=fi).
- Libraries.fi. (2023). *Finnish Public Libraries Statistics*. Retrieved from <https://tilastot.kirjastot.fi/?lang=en>.
- Martin, A., & Grudziecki, J. (2006). DigEuLit: Concepts and tools for digital literacy development. *Innovation in Teaching and Learning in Information and Computer Sciences*, 5(4), 249–267. doi:10.11120/ital.2006.05040249

- Ministry of Finance Finland. (2023). *Promoting Digitalisation*. Retrieved from <https://vm.fi/en/programme-for-the-promotion-of-digitalisation>.
- Ojaranta, A., & Litmanen-Peitsala, P. (2019). *Digital skills in finnish public libraries to engage in the national operating model for digital support for citizens*. International Federation of Library Associations and Institution. Retrieved from <http://urn.fi/URN:NBN:Fi-fe2020100882348>.
- Poutanen, S., & Kovalainen, A. (2023). *Skills, creativity and innovation in the digital platform era: Analyzing the new reality of professions and entrepreneurship*. New York: Routledge.
- Richter, S., Bell, J., Jackson, M. K., Lee, L. D., Dashora, P., & Surette, S. (2019). Public library users: Perspectives of socially vulnerable populations. *Journal of Library Administration*, 59(4), 431–441. doi:10.1080/01930826.2019.1593711
- Sefyrin, J., Gustafsson, M., & Wihlborg, E. (2021). Addressing digital diversity: Care matters in vulnerable digital relations in a Swedish library context. *Science and Public Policy*, 48(6), 841–848. doi:10.1093/scipol/scab048
- Sewell, B. B., & Gilbert, C. (2015). What makes access services staff happy? A job satisfaction survey. *Journal of Access Services*, 12(3–4), 47–74. doi:10.1080/15367967.2015.1061435
- Thomas, C. (1993). De-constructing concepts of care. *Sociology*, 27(4), 649–669. doi:10.1177/0038038593027004006
- Tronto, J. C. (1998). An ethic of care. *Generations*, 22(3), 15–20.
- van Dijk, J. A. (2012). The evolution of the digital divide-the digital divide turns to inequality of skills and usage. In J. Bus, M. Cromptom, M. Hildebrandt & G. Matekides (Eds.), *Digital enlightenment yearbook 2012* (pp. 57–75). Amsterdam, NL: IOS Press.