Highlighting Local Heritage: Digital Collections and Virtual Exhibitions in Latvian Public Libraries

Daina Valeine[1][0009-0002-4191-9438], Gita Mikuda[2][0009-0005-3651-1720]

[1] Latvian Academy of Culture, Latvian College of Culture, Bruninieku Street 57, Riga, Latvia
[2] National Library of Latvia, Mukusalas Street 3, Riga, Latvia; Latvian Academy of Culture, Latvian College of Culture, Bruninieku Street 57, Riga, Latvia
`daina.valeine@lka.edu.lv, gita.mikuda@lka.edu.lv`

Abstract. The study examines the digitization processes of local cultural documents in Latvian public libraries, as well as practices for highlighting local history through digital collections and virtual exhibitions. The study is based on an analysis of annual reports of public libraries, a survey of library staff and interviews. It is concluded that although the overall pace of digitization of local history documents is still relatively modest, Latvian public libraries have increased their digitization efforts. Publicly accessible, interactive digital collections and virtual exhibitions are being created to promote cultural heritage. The recent launch of the integration of the digital collections of the public libraries into a single platform - the Digital Library of the National Library of Latvia - is of crucial importance for sustainable preservation and accessibility.

Keywords: Digitization, Public Libraries, Cultural Heritage, Digital Collections, Virtual Exhibitions.

1   Introduction

An important part of the work of public libraries is to research local culture, collect and provide access to local study resources. Public libraries research, investigate, collect and preserve historical documents and evidence relating to the history and culture of the local area. Local history collections are unique to each public library and highly valued by the public; they showcase local traditions, values, achievements and history. By providing access to and popularisation of local history, public libraries strengthen local identity and promote social cohesion.

Due to the digital transformation trends in today's society and the changing information seeking behaviour of library users, libraries are increasingly and purposefully focusing on the development of library resources and services in the digital environment. Libraries are increasingly digitizing library resources and making them digitally accessible. The development of digital technologies enables libraries to effectively promote and provide access to collected local history materials, making them more accessible and popular among other library users a well. Libraries develop and present virtual

exhibitions, videos, online collections, and digital databases. They have also provided content for websites and interactive platforms dedicated to the cultural history of the region.

The aim of this exploratory study is to give an insight into the digitization and promotion of local cultural documents in the public libraries of Latvia, and to share practices for highlighting local history in public libraries through digital collections and virtual exhibitions. The study dataset is originated from the Latvian Academy of Culture research "Digital Transformation Challenges and Prospective Solutions in Latvian Public Libraries" (2024-2025), which covers the analysis of public library activities, resources and services in the digital environment (Valeine, Mikuda & Holma, 2025).

The structure of the paper is as follows. Chapter 2 discusses the digitization of local history documents in the public libraries in Latvia. The third section provides an overview and trends of digital collections, databases, websites and virtual exhibitions of public libraries in Latvia. Finally, Section 4 concludes and presents recommendations for future work.

2 Digitization and Promotion of Local Cultural Documents in the Public Libraries of Latvia

In the field of cultural heritage, since 2011 the European Union has been recommending that member states should implement digitization, online accessibility and digital preservation of cultural heritage, encouraging the digitization of materials held in libraries, archives and museums (European Comission, 2011). In response to this call, Latvian libraries have been digitizing the textual and visual documents of their local cultural heritage, with the aim of making them more accessible to the public in accordance with copyright requirements and ensuring their safe preservation. The National Library of Latvia is the largest digitizer of cultural heritage, digitizing old and rare books, manuscripts, periodicals, posters, sound recordings, maps and other documents through the "Digitization of Cultural Heritage Content" project (Latvijas Nacionālā bibliotēka, 2017).

The Latvian Library Sector Strategy 2027 identifies the creation and inclusion of local cultural digital content on a single digital platform as one of the tasks of the library sector to serve as community strengthener and sustainability promoter (LR Kultūras ministrija, 2023). In accordance with this goal, the National Library of Latvia has developed and maintains a *nationwide digital cultural heritage platform "Digital Library"* since 2023. The "Digital library" already contains more than 3.8 million digital objects (Bandere, 2023).

Regarding Latvia's public libraries, the 2023 annual reports of these institutions indicate that the process has been initiated in twenty-four of the twenty-nine major public libraries across the country's regions (including village and parish libraries under their jurisdiction). Only in five municipalities are digitization processes not yet underway. However, it should be noted that only a small part of the local cultural collections of Latvian public libraries has been digitized so far.

Publicly available annual library reports provide data on the number of digitized documents. Libraries digitize almost equally text documents (55% of the total number of digitized documents in 2023) and images (44%), while relatively few sound and video recordings have been digitized (0.25% and 0.37% respectively) (see Fig. 1).
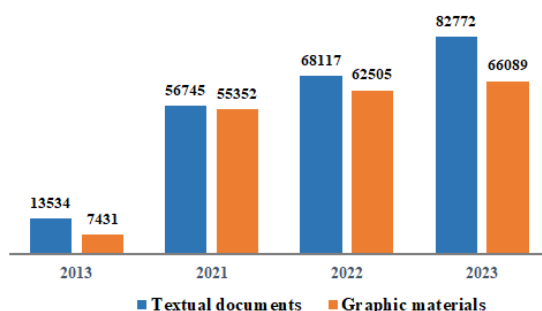

Fig. 1. Number of text and graphic documents digitized by Latvian public libraries, 2013; 2021-2023 (Latvian Culture Data Portal, 2025).

Digitization volumes and growth rates cannot be considered high in general, with the exception of libraries in some Latvian municipalities, although a small but steady increase in the number of digitized documents is observed in 2021-2023. Compared to a decade ago, digitization volumes in public libraries have grown rapidly: the volume of text documents has increased 6-fold, while the number of digitized images has increased almost 9-fold (Latvian Culture Data Portal, 2025).

A study conducted by the National Library of Latvia in 2023 concluded that digitization of local cultural documents in Latvian public libraries has so been largely unsystematic, relying primarily on individual projects and initiatives, by creating thematic digital collections or participating in national-level projects (Ausēja, 2023). In order to systematically and comprehensively discover the content of cultural heritage collections in the digital environment, digitalization should become one of the daily core tasks of libraries, even though it faces several challenges.

The 2023 Library Annual Reports show that most libraries have identified digitization processes as one of their priorities for the future and have stressed their importance. For example, the Aluksne Municipality Library mentions that "*local history studies are one of the priorities of library activities and the work of parish libraries in this area should be intensified, with the priority of making local history materials more widely available and therefore digitized. All library employees should be trained in digitization skills*" (Alūksnes novada bibliotēka, 2024).

The Latvian Academy of Culture's 2024 study on the digital activities of Latvian public libraries included a survey of public library staff (517 respondents) and four semi-structured interviews with library managers (Valeine, Mikuda & Holma, 2025). The survey data show that library staff are aware of the importance of digital resources and services in libraries: 40% of library staff strongly agree and 39% rather agree with

the statement that *"a library is unimaginable without digital resources and communication in a digital environment"*. However, not all staff are confident in their ability to use digital technologies in library work: 22% of respondents indicate that they are not sufficient, and 12% strongly agree and 27% rather agree with the statement that *"there is a lack of information about digital and AI tools"*. Thus, library staff would need additional training and encouragement in the use of digital technologies.

The survey data indicate that the proportion of public library staff involved in digitizing local cultural resources, creating digital collections and virtual exhibitions in public libraries is still relatively low (see Fig. 2).
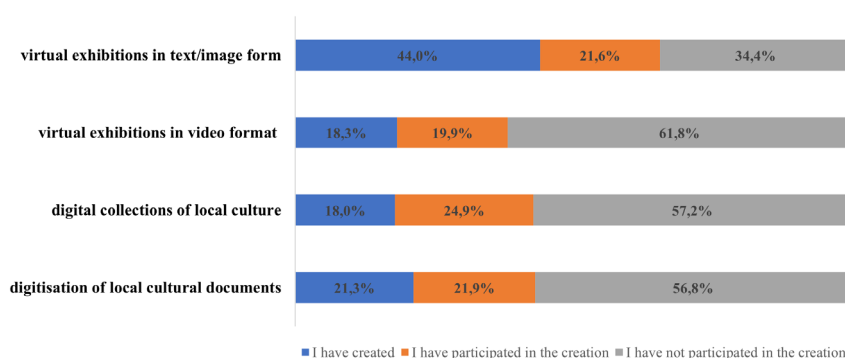

Fig. 2. Participation of public library staff in the development of library digital resources (Valeine, Mikuda & Holma, 2025).

Library managers and staff questioned in the study have identified what they consider to be the most important factors hindering the digital transformation of library resources and services, including staff involvement in digitization processes (see Fig. 3).

In the interviews, the most important factors affecting digitization mentioned by library managers were the lack of powerful technical equipment and sustainable preservation of documents, the need for staff training, as well as frequent staff turnover and workload in other library work processes. However, it was also stressed that much depends on the attitude and motivation of library staff, as well as on the support of local authorities and the possibilities for cooperation with the National Library of Latvia and other institutions.

In the master's thesis defended in 2020 at the University of Latvia, Library and Information Science program, a study of digitization of local history collections in Latvian libraries was conducted, and the main recommendations for libraries, which would help to implement digitization processes more successfully, were formulated (Bērziņa, 2020):

- building collaborations to add high-quality information to the collection;
- providing professional development activities for staff;
- improving technological equipment;
- addressing problematic situations (copyright regulation, lack of funding);
- creation of digital resources and databases;

- promotion of digital material in various ways.

Fig. 3. Key factors affecting digitization of local cultural documents in Latvian public libraries
(Valeine, Mikuda & Holma, 2025).

The authors agree with the recommendations of the above-mentioned thesis that creating and providing access to digital collections and databases is a very important way of enabling the wider public to be informed. The following chapters of the article are devoted to the analysis of digitization and promotion of digital documents in public libraries, providing an insight into the local cultural heritage digital collections and virtual exhibitions provided in Latvian public libraries.

3 Digital Collections and Virtual Exhibitions of Local Cultural Heritage Provided by Latvian Public Libraries

Traditionally, public libraries have not only served as repositories of information, knowledge, and cultural heritage, but they have also put more work and effort into making these information resources more accessible and visible to the public. One of the ways that libraries promote access to the often unique documents of local culture that they hold in their collections is through the creation of digital collections and digital exhibitions. Exciting digital collections and exhibitions that are thematically relevant to users give people an audiovisual and interactive glimpse into local cultural heritage, stimulate engagement and curiosity, and draw attention to library resources and services in this area.

Although the terms *"digital collection"* and *"virtual exhibition"* are close and sometimes used interchangeably, there is a difference between a digital collection and a digital exhibition. A virtual exhibition is considered to be one of the forms of publishing a digital collection or promoting a collection/ collections. According to the terminology approved by the Latvian Academy of Sciences, in the library sector the term *"digital collection"* refers to a database, platform or other type of digital repository containing a systematically described set of digital objects with metadata, made available to users

(online or locally in a library). Such a digital collection may contain digital documents on a specific topic, place, event, etc., and provides users with the opportunity to access certain types of information, as well as the function of preserving and promoting digital objects ("Digitālā kolekcija", 2021). Local culture digital collections include full-text press articles, photographs, memoirs, audio and video recordings, and other documents. They can be created for a single subject, or they can bring together all the library's local cultural digital resources on a single platform, organized within a defined framework. The main advantages of a digital collection are (Dzirkale-Maļavkina, 2022):

- remote access to resources and bibliographic information;
- a rational search and retrieval process
- the possibility to create thematic clusters;
- secure preservation of documents;
- convenient handling of digital copies of documents;
- ability to share and integrate data on other platforms.

A *"virtual exhibition"*, on the other hand, is analogous to a physically accessible exhibition, and although it contains a thematically similar set of digital objects, it is different in its purpose and nature: to provide users with a personal, cognitive, intellectual and interactive experience (Ciurea & Filip, 2019), to deepen understanding, reach, engage and inform the digital exhibition audience. It should be noted that simply digitising documents and placing them in an online database or platform does not create a virtual exhibition. A virtual exhibition is a virtual or web-based exhibition that is created according to a specific design and scenario. The virtual exhibition of local cultural documents must meet the following requirements (March, 2023):

- be attractive and engaging;
- hightlight and promote collections;
- create context and interpretation for collectional documents;
- perform outreach to different communities to increase visitor engagement;
- innovate and engage in "cultural discourse" with audiencies;
- promote research using collectional materials.

Virtual exhibitions (also called "digital exhibitions" or "online exhibitions") are creatively designed using a variety of digital tools and open-source software. They can be available as online websites, mobile apps, presentations, video and audio files in a user-friendly audiovisual format. When digital exhibitions are more intensively enhanced with interactivity, simulations, virtual reality, 3D tours and other elements, they are most often referred to as virtual exhibitions. Further, we will explore the types and examples of digital collections and virtual exhibitions of local cultural heritage in Latvian public libraries.

The main libraries in all regions of Latvia are responsible for developing and offering **digital collections of local culture** to library users, while libraries in smaller towns, municipalities and villages are usually involved in developing their central library collections by providing information, scanning processes or metadata. Libraries are developing special, thematic collections or general, county-wide digital local history collections and digital document databases. Table 1 provides the *key thematic coverage of the digital collections and virtual exhibitions* presented in the main regional libraries.

Table 1. Thematic coverage of public libraries' local studies digital collections and virtual exhibitions.

Subject (coverage)	Publishing format	Examples
local history and culture of the region	structured digital database, website, section of library homepage, multimedia platform, Flipbooks	"Digital database of the intangible cultural heritage of Liepaja region"; "Kuldiga: History. Events. History and People"
cultural or industrial heritage objects	database, website, section of library homepage, digital platform, presentation	"Dinaburg Fortress"; "Architectural complex "Ziemelblazma"; "Jekabpils Sugar Factory"
local cultural heritage activities, historical events	database, website, digital platform, multimedia platform, presentation, Canva, isuu, genially	"Chronicle of the Poetry Days"; "The Singing Latgale" (about Latgale Song Festival); "The time of Latvia's Third Awakening in photographs"
local arts, folklore and traditions	database, website, digital platform, pdf presentation, Canva, isuu	"Girls Choir "Cantus" of Ernesta Vignera Kuldiga Music School"; "Paintings by Irina Prigun"; "Milk stories" (local recipes)
memories, life stories of local community members	database, website, digital platform, multimedia platform	"Remarkable people in Jelgava"; "Life stories of people from Klintaine parish"; "Encyclopaedia of local people"

The digital collections offer a *wide range of digitized local studies documents*: press articles, text documents, manuscripts, photographs, images, greeting cards, drawings, photo albums, letters, posters, images of the paintings, books, booklets, song lyrics, video files and audio files. The most unusual digital documents preserved in the digital collections of public libraries are: photographs of Jewish tombstones - Ludza Town Library collection "Jewish Cemetery" (Ludzas novada bibliotēka, 2025), song leaflets of the traditional Cemetery Festival (Jekabpils Principal Library, 2025), recipes for local milk dishes in photographs, audio and video files (Preiļi Main Library, 2025).

The digital local studies collections and virtual exhibitions vary in format and accessibility:
1) locally, in-library collections on library servers, external storage devices, CDs or other locally accessible digital tools and platforms,
2) bibliographic/annotation or digital object databases included in the library's electronic catalogue,
3) publicly accessible collections integrated into the library's website or as other online sites,

4) publicly accessible multimedia online websites,
5) textual, visual, audio or video files or e-publications,
6) other resources (walking tours with maps, online 3d tours, digital puzzles).

Let's explore examples of the **digital collections**. *Locally accessible library collections* stored on a local server or on locally accessible digital tools or devices are long-standing databases that are gradually being integrated into online platforms, or documents that are protected by copyright. Public libraries are planning to integrate these types of databases into the common cultural heritage platform maintained by the National Library of Latvia, which also allows for differentiation of access rights according to copyright restrictions.

The second type of digital collections, which has been around longer and is the most popular, are *databases created in the library's electronic catalogue*. These can be databases of local cultural bibliographic records only, or they can be supplemented by annotations and corresponding digital objects. Libraries have managed to adapt the successful design and performance of the databases of local cultural digital objects in the library's electronic catalogue (see Fig. 4).
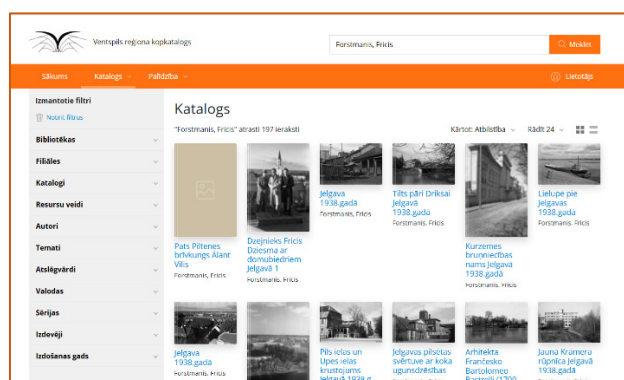

Fig. 4. Collection of local cultural documents in e-catalogue of Ventspils Main library (2025).

The approach to integrating local cultural digital objects into the library catalogue has advantages: library users can access library resources in one place, in a single database, and it is easy to retrieve information on all the resources: books, articles, photographs, video and audio recordings, in a search process. However, the problem is that these databases are like "little pockets" in the digital environment. They store valuable documents, but not many people are familiar with them, as it is not easy for an unaware person to find them because they are not indexed by search engines such as Google. Unfortunately, the electronic catalogues of Latvian libraries are not available in one central location, but on websites for each region of Latvia. This does not contribute to the popularisation of local culture and easy access for those interested in this field.

Digital collections available online, either as part of a library's website or as a stand-alone online site, are more user-friendly. Libraries are developing both smaller and larger digital collections, adding text, video, audio and interactivity, according to financial possibilities, local municipalities' support, staff capacity and competences. The

most common type of digital collections are databases of notable people from the region, which contain biographies, memory stories, documents and portraits (see Fig. 5).
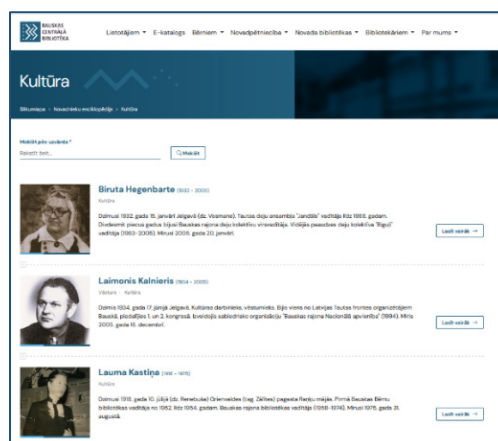

Fig. 5. Insight into the "Encyclopaedia of local people" (Bauskas Centrālā bibliotēka, 2025).

A specific type of digital collections are *bibliographic information or full-text databases of the local press*, which are provided by most of the main libraries in the regions. Subject to copyright restrictions, full-text digital newspapers and magazines are made freely available, either publicly or only in the libraries on site. Digital databases are being created for both the historical press (from the beginning of the 20th century) and the current regional press.

The most extensive digital collections are those that have been created through collaborative projects with other memory institutions, or that have benefited from public, municipal or private project funding. Examples of such projects are Jēkabpils Regional Library's digital collections about the Jēkabpils sugar factory, the Kuldīga Main Library's database "Kuldīga: History. Events. People", Latgale Central Library's collections "Singing Latgale", "Dinaburgas Fortress" (see Fig. 6) and others.

Virtual exhibitions are quite popular in Latvian public libraries and are created and offered by the main libraries of the regions, as well as by town and village libraries on their online platforms and social networks. The Ogre Central Library acknowledges in its 2023 Annual Report that "*virtual exhibitions continue to play an important role in promoting local history. The creation of exhibitions is based on significant research. They provide insight into the collection, stimulate interest in important cultural events in the region, anniversaries of notable local people*" (Ogres Centrālā bibliotēka, 2024). Increasingly, there is a shift in emphasis from face-to-face exhibitions to virtual exhibitions in the promotion of local cultural resources. For example, in 2023, the Limbazu Main Library hosted ten local history exhibitions in virtual format and one that could only be viewed in person (Limbažu galvenā bibliotēka, 2024).

As mentioned above, the virtual exhibitions offered by public libraries vary from large ones, with a wide range of digital objects, enhanced with audio and video content,

and custom-designed, to smaller and simpler ones. They are created to celebrate a special traditions, local festivals, anniversaries of a notable people or to explore and promote local cultural and industrial history.

Fig. 6. Insight into the "Dinaburgas Fortress" (Latgales Centrālā bibliotēka, 2015).

For example, the Aluksne Municipality Library offers a series of virtual exhibitions "Stories about us", which brings together photographs, documents, press articles and residents' memories about the cultural and industrial heritage of the county, such as "Aluksne Canteen", "Aluksne Tuberculosis Hospital" (see Fig. 7), "Publisher and Merchant Reinis Pastalnieks", "Stage Ensembles in Aluksne District" and other virtual exhibitions. Unique are the memories of the inhabitants recorded in the cycle of exhibitions, such as "Public order guards", "April clean-ups", "Alūksne women in the National Resistance Movement. 1944-1953", "The liquidation of the Chernobyl consequences".

High-quality virtual exhibitions are also provided in presentation and video formats. For example, Jelgava City Library in 2024 has created an interactive virtual exhibition dedicated to the 105th anniversary of Latvia "Our Land – Latvia. Our Heart – Jelgava". The virtual exhibition takes the viewer on a virtual musical journey through the decades and lets you experience how Latvia's birthday was celebrated in Jelgava from the proclamation of Latvia's independence on 18 November 1918 to a glimpse into the future – in 2028 (Jelgava City Library, 2024).

Fig. 7. A glimpse into the virtual exhibition "Aluksne Tuberculosis Hospital"
(Alūksnes novada bibliotēka, 2025).

Fig. 8. Interactive virtual exhibition "Our Land – Latvia. Our heart - Jelgava"
(Jelgavas Pilsētas bibliotēka, 2024).

The virtual exhibitions of the Kuldiga Main Library on notable local people, cultural monuments, local culture and art (Kuldīgas galvenā bibliotēka, 2025), Riga Central Library, Limbazu Main Library and other libraries are also of great interest. To celebrate the quincentenary of the Latvian book, in 2021-2025 several public libraries have created virtual exhibitions on publishers, old and rare books and periodicals from their region. For example, the Madona Regional Library has created an interactive virtual exhibition that introduces the oldest books from the library's collection published before 1923 (Madona Regional Library, 2023).

The Salaspils Regional Library's has created a multimedia site dedicated to the poet and local resident "Knuts Skujenieks". It ensures the virtual preservation of the poet's literary heritage and living space and makes it accessible to everyone (see Fig. 9)

Fig. 9. Multimedia platform "Knuts Skujenieks" (Salaspils novada bibliotēka, 2025).

Not only librarians, but also digital technology and design specialists are involved in the creation of larger digital exhibitions. For example, Kuldiga Main Library acknowledges that for the creation of a digital collection - virtual 3D tour of the history of Kuldiga Jews (see Fig. 10) - the project manager, local history specialist, librarian with in-depth understanding of local history, IT specialist and media literacy and communication specialist were involved (Vespere, 2022).
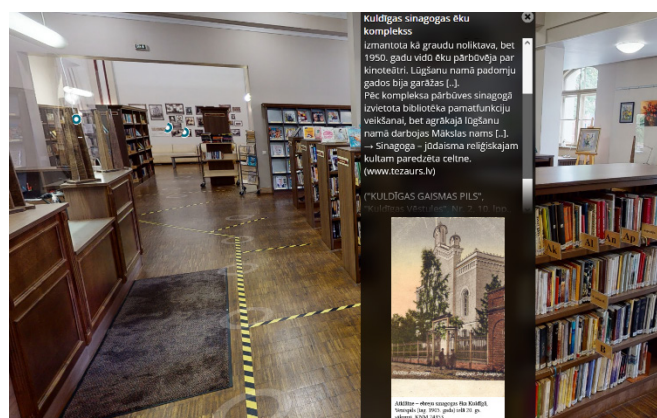

Fig. 10. Virtual tour "Kuldīga's Jewish history in digital environment"
(Kuldīgas novada bibliotēka, 2025).

Latvia's public libraries are constantly enhancing and updating their digital collections and exhibitions, encouraging members of the local community to share information, historical documents, photographs and memories in their possession. Significant projects are also being developed that will result in new digital collections of local history, e.g. the Salaspils County Library has launched a new interactive website "Salaspils County Story" (Salaspils novada bibliotēka, 2024).

4   Conclusions

Latvian libraries, particularly the National Library of Latvia, are digitizing cultural heritage documents on a large scale and making them available to the public in accordance with copyright regulations. Over the last decade, public libraries have also increased digitization of local cultural documents, although the pace of digitization remains relatively slow. The survey of library staff identified several key reasons hindering progress: insufficient and ageing staff, lack of digitization skills, lack of support from local authorities, insufficient access to necessary equipment and server capacity, and the need for a national strategy and guidelines for digitization of cultural heritage in libraries. Motivating factors include public demand, collaborative initiatives, support from the National library of Latvia and from other public libraries.

Latvian public libraries regularly offer digital collections and virtual exhibitions, most of which promote local cultural heritage. Digital collections and exhibitions vary in the form of bibliographic and full-text digital databases, websites, digital platforms, and visual, audio, and video content created with Canva, PowerPoint, and other digital tools. These collections focus on different local heritage themes: local history and culture of the region, cultural or industrial heritage objects, local traditions, memories and life stories of local community members.

Various collaborative projects between memory and cultural institutions have played the crucial role in the development of extensive digital collections and virtual exhibitions in public libraries, resulting in high-quality multimedia digital platforms of cultural heritage collections. Additionally, the virtual exhibitions created by public libraries, which are sometimes smaller in scale, are also essential for the promotion of local culture. Increasing cooperation of public libraries with the National Library of Latvia in placing their digital collections on the national platform "Digital Library" is a positive development, that will solve the problems of preservation of digital objects, which have been quite pressing so far, and will also significantly contribute to the accessibility of public libraries' digital collections, ensuring they are available to a wider audience.

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