



IDEA LAB

**Jeff B. Nyoka**

*Library and  
Information Services,  
City of Johannesburg  
Municipality*

# South African Metropolitan Public Libraries Using Technology to Support Authors and Writing Development

*This Idea Lab piece explores how library services in three South African metropolitan cities use different technologies to support authors and writing, with insights on artificial intelligence (AI) use in libraries from AI industry expert Scott Hanselman, vice president of developer community at Microsoft.*

According to the General Household Survey 2024 (Statistics South Africa, 2025), in South Africa, more than 82% of the population has access to the Internet, including free access to Wi-Fi in libraries and other spaces. Communities are exposed to more digital content and tools for reading, writing, self-publishing, and learning in general. This increase in Internet access requires library staff to be aware of emerging technologies, such as AI, and how they can be incorporated into library services (e.g., author support or writing development programs). A survey conducted by Western Cape Library Service (2019) reports that South Africa has more than 1,800 public libraries in nine provinces. Some libraries are in smaller municipalities with small populations, limited budgets, and less resources. Collaborations with tech companies, and intergovernmental relations between municipalities, can empower librarians to support authors in using technology.

## **Author Support in Metropolitan Public Libraries in South Africa**

In metropolitan cities, libraries have better access to the Internet, information and communications technology tools, and formal and informal learning opportunities such as digital literacy programs. However, it is important to ensure that library communities, including aspiring authors, benefit from resources by learning how to use technologies for various purposes such as content creation, writing, researching, self-publishing, and other editorial tasks. To learn more about public libraries using technologies to support authors and writing in the digital era, this author interviewed library professionals from three metropolitan public libraries in South Africa: City of Cape Town, City of Johannesburg, and eThekweni Municipality.

## **City of Cape Town Libraries**

City of Cape Town library services have embraced technology in various ways through organized author support programs held in libraries that incorporate technology. In 2024, staffers organized a digital literacy and creative writing program—mostly for first-time writers—that blended word-processing skills with story circles, where participants were given a platform to read aloud or conduct storytelling in groups.

Library staff introduced programs such as Digital Workflow for book layouts and designs, using the library's Smart Cape, a system that provides free computer and Internet access to library users, particularly in disadvantaged neighborhoods, bringing communities closer to online information, educational resources, and services, including

digital literacy programs. Libraries also host capacity-building exercises that include information about the business aspects of publishing. Aspiring authors are introduced to use of generative AI for titles, blurbs, and promotional questions, with emphasis on verification and ethics. Some library patrons' stories were published, and their books are available in library collections.

City of Cape Town libraries offer structured writing courses, self-publishing clinics, and hands-on workshops with invited writing experts, and they showcase local authors during South African Library Week and National Book Day. As part of author support, according to Christelle Lubbe, head of Professional Services and Programmes, Library and Information Services at City of Cape Town, the writing courses “utilize Smart Cape computers, teaching everything from word-processor basics to Canva design, Kindle Create, and Amazon KDP mechanics.” City of Cape Town libraries have also piloted sessions in which patrons discover how to use generative AI for brainstorming, outlining, and marketing their work. Lubbe emphasizes that the next edition of their Digital Literacy Toolkit Level 2 will include an AI literacy module for all 101 of the city's public libraries.

### **City of Johannesburg Libraries**

City of Johannesburg (COJ) Libraries and Information Services introduced e-learning services, including access to free Wi-Fi, computers in library spaces, and digital literacy resources, through its website: [www.cojelearning.org.za](http://www.cojelearning.org.za). These services provide digital content, such as free online courses, reading and writing competitions, and access to e-books. Digital Literacy has been a key library program in empowering emerging authors and communities to understand various technologies for writing and self-publishing. Communities get introduced to free Microsoft courses, such as MS Office packages for writing, instruction on AI basics, and other courses for freelancers. Digital Literacy and Creative Writing for Senior Citizens is the most notable program, resulting in a book titled *COJ Senior Citizens Write!* published by University of Johannesburg (UJ) Press (Nyoka, 2022). The book consists of 14 stories written by seniors who learned to type by attending digital literacy classes.

### **eThekweni Municipality Libraries**

eThekweni Municipal Libraries (EML), located in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal province, aims to introduce communities to reading and writing resources through a blend of traditional and technology-based services. One innovative approach involves mobile buses equipped with technology, including free Wi-Fi, to reach underserved communities that lack libraries or access to the Internet and computers. EML's programs support authors by hosting workshops and writing competitions, and promoting indigenous languages. They facilitate digital literacy drives, which provide computer classes for aspiring authors. Due to EML's services, Durban is recognized as a UNESCO City of Literature for its impactful reading and writing campaigns. A notable initiative is the annual One City, One Book reading campaign, which encourages community members to read a selected book and participate in discussions and various writing formats. Siyabonga Mtshali, acting district manager of EML, mentions, “As a UNESCO City of Literature, we are enhancing our services with mobile buses that include Wi-Fi, allowing authors to access digital content in rural areas. We use both conventional and digital methods because the eThekweni Municipality is comprised of 60% rural and 40% urban communities. This balance ensures that the digital divide does not widen and that those without access to technology are not left behind.”

EML provides incentives, including competition prizes and other opportunities, to encourage aspiring authors to write and attend workshops. It is interesting to note that EML's author support pays attention to the local indigenous language, isiZulu. *Ezosiba*, an anthology that won the 2024 UJ Debut Prize for Creative Writing in isiZulu, runs parallel to the English anthology *Beyond the Pen* (UJ, 2024). EML's vision is to work

with partners—the University of KwaZulu-Natal Centre for Creative Arts and the Durban Film Office—on adapting books for television so the stories are accessible in various formats and to find ways of introducing use of AI applications in author support programs.

## **An Interview with AI Expert Scott Hanselman**

Library partnerships with tech giants, like Microsoft and Google, can create valuable systems for accessing digital resources for publishing and author support. Microsoft's Hanselman, a renowned expert in AI, was interviewed to share thoughts on the role of public libraries in the realm of AI. Hanselman is passionate about AI, and making tech more diverse and accessible. He provides insights on use of AI in libraries to support authors and publishing:

**1. What do you think AI can do to support book publishing, or what are the dangers in the creative writing space when AI is used? For example, in libraries, we would like to have a varied collection of e-content that is published and available on digital platforms, including in local languages, because the book-buying and publishing processes can be long and expensive.**

AI holds significant promise for transforming book publishing, especially in contexts where traditional processes are slow, expensive, or inaccessible. For libraries, particularly those looking to expand digital collections in local languages, AI can help bridge the gap. It can assist with everything from editing and formatting manuscripts to translating them into indigenous or underrepresented languages. This could enable communities to publish culturally relevant stories more affordably and quickly, increasing the diversity and inclusivity of digital library offerings.

However, the use of AI in creative writing is not without its risks. One major concern is the potential erosion of cultural authenticity. AI models are trained on vast datasets that often reflect dominant or Western narratives, and when prompted to create local content, they may unintentionally reproduce stereotypes or flatten the nuance of lived experiences. Without careful human oversight, there's a danger that these tools could generate content that misrepresents communities or undermines the value of original, human storytelling.

For libraries, the key is to use AI as a tool to amplify human creativity and access, not to replace it. That means supporting local writers with AI tools for drafting or translating while ensuring the final content is reviewed, curated, and contextually appropriate. It also means investing in AI systems that are tuned to local languages and cultural sensibilities, so that the technology serves the community rather than reshaping it through external norms.

**2. At Microsoft, how do you think libraries should support digital literacy and the introduction of new technologies? What can libraries do differently to support communities in the digital era?**

From Microsoft's perspective, libraries are vital partners in closing the digital divide. They're trusted community spaces that can help people not only access technology but also understand and shape it. To support digital literacy, libraries should go beyond basic computer skills and focus on critical thinking, teaching topics like online safety, privacy, media literacy, and how AI works. Microsoft offers tools like Copilot and LinkedIn Learning that libraries can use to support this mission. To thrive in the digital era, libraries can also reimagine themselves as innovation hubs—hosting coding clubs, makerspaces, or workshops on new technologies. Just as important is ensuring access to local, culturally relevant content and offering support that meets real community needs, from job training to telehealth.

## Conclusion

The three featured metropolitan public library services demonstrate passion for supporting authors and writing development by introducing innovative workshops, competitions, and annual events using traditional library services. Notably, Cape Town libraries have done a lot to integrate technologies into their author support programs. However, libraries in South Africa have varied identities, challenges, and users in their regions, but they can learn from one another how to integrate technologies, introduce digital literacy to communities, and share resources, among other endeavors. With increased funding allocated for library services, more technologies and digital literacy programs can be introduced to provide tech skills for authors on how to use AI, self-publish, or find freelance platforms.

## References

- Nyoka, J. (Ed.). (2022). *CoJ senior citizens write! An anthology of short stories written by senior citizens, through a digital literacy programme*. UJ Press.
- Statistics South Africa. (2025). *General Household Survey 2024* [Statistical release]. Stats SA. <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0318/P03182024.pdf>
- Western Cape Library Service. (2019). *Provincial library services in South Africa: A comparative staff analysis*. Western Cape Government. [https://d7.westerncape.gov.za/assets/staff\\_analysis\\_2019.pdf](https://d7.westerncape.gov.za/assets/staff_analysis_2019.pdf)
- University of Johannesburg. (2024, September 6). *UJ announces 2024 winners for creative writing in isiZulu and Sesotho sa Leboa*. UJ. <https://news.uj.ac.za/news/uj-announces-2024-winners-for-creative-writing-in-isizulu-and-sesotho-sa-leboa>