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The Public Library's Relationship with

The Digital Divide

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May 2006

Abstract

There has been an evolving battlefield in our midst and it is not in Iraq. This battlefield is not full of war machines and soldiers dressed in military garb. The battlefield I will discuss is in every community in America. It is a place full of knowledge, computers, internet access, books and people of all ages. Within the library community strategic discussions are taking place to protect free speech, personal privacy, and to close gaps in the digital divide. The installation of computers and internet technology, in a space well-known for privacy, has created new problems for the library. Can the local library close the gaps in the digital divide for their communities? Will free speech and individual privacy be the casualties on this new battleground?

Introduction

The library community recognized early in the development of desktop computers and the internet that the way they provide information services would be impacted. The need to change their methods and practices was obvious. The funding required libraries to provide new services, train staff, buy computers and high speed internet access needed to be procured. Before the term “digital divide” was defined the library community was making plans to implement these technologies to serve their communities across America. While libraries were busy implementing these new technologies and helping to narrow the gap in the digital divide, laws were being passed in Washington D.C. that would impact the library community. Eventually legal battles will be fought to protect the right of library patrons across the country. This paper will examine the history, issues, legal implications and the future of the local public library.

Digital Divide Background and Statistics

The 2005 Pew Global Attitudes Survey released in February 2006, reported that the United States currently ranks fourth in the number of computer users world wide. Making only minimal gains in the number of computers users between 2002 and 2005, there was only a two percent change from 74 to 76 percent of Americans that use a computer anywhere occasionally (Truly a World Wide Web, 2006) . Over three years the United States should have made greater gains in computer usage if the digital divide was shrinking. What is happening with the digital divide in America?

In the 1990's the “digital divide” was first defined as the disparity between the technologically advantaged and the technologically disadvantaged. In recent years the definition has been expanded to include the gap in access to the internet (Digital World, 2003). With

networks, bandwidth and technology advancing rapidly and spread throughout the country, there are still groups that do not have access to computers and the internet. Factors that influence the relationship of people to the digital divide include education level, age, income, geography, race and culture (Toward Equality of Access, 2004). "Not surprisingly, the groups who were initially most likely to lag in adopting the internet now lag in access speeds. Those with less education, those with lower household incomes, and Americans age 65 and older." (Fox, 2005).

The Pew Internet and American Life Project conducted a survey in May-June 2005 to examine who is using the internet in America. Pew's 2005 survey found that 65 million or 32 percent of Americans do not use the internet (Fox, 2005). Their results present an overall picture of where particular groups in America are in relation to the digital divide. I have divided Pew's results into three categories by the relative size of the gap in the digital divide, large gap, medium gap and small gap. Groups within the large gap category are non-high school graduates where only 29 percent use the internet, Hispanics at 31.8 percent and senior citizens at 26 percent. Within the medium gap category are African Americans with 57 percent using the internet, adults without children at 60 percent and high school graduates at 61 percent. The technologically advantaged with the smallest gaps include white Americans at 70 percent, parents with minor children at 83 percent and college graduates at 89 percent using the internet (Fox, 2005). After examining these results the conclusion I have drawn is that the individual's level of education is the major factor impacting whether they are the technologically disadvantaged or not. Higher levels of education also increase income levels which is factor into whether you access the internet. One of the major reasons given for not using the internet was economic, relating to the cost of technology, software and internet access. The lack of computer skills, distrust of the internet, unavailability of high speed internet access in their geographic

location and having no interest in the internet were other reasons given by survey respondents (Fox, 2005).

The U. S. Department of Commerce (DOC) conducted their own analysis of the use of the internet in America using census data. Published in 2002, "A Nation Online: How Americans are Expanding Their Use of the Internet", focuses on whether a computer and internet connections are physically within the household. The DOC statistics further clarify the groups of Americans disenfranchised from computer technology and the internet. The DOC reported that 54.6 percent of U.S. households had broadband access to the internet. But only 24.7 percent of rural Americans have broadband connections, leaving rural America on the losing side of the digital divide (A Nation Online, 2002). The Pew Internet and American Life Project released new information related to the technology gap in rural America in February 2006. Pew's data is based upon phone surveys and it found that the internet gap has been closing in rural areas. Pew reported that 24 percent of the adults in rural America now had high speed internet access at home (Rural America, 2006). I question the accuracy of Pew's data and their collection methods. When comparing the DOC 2002 results, extracted from U.S. Census data, of 24.7 percent with the Pew 2006 phone survey data of 24 percent, in four years there has been no real change. So how can Pew say that the gap in the digital divide is closing? These statistics demonstrate that there is a need for more accurate data to truly evaluate the scope of the digital divide problem in rural America. For rural and poor Americans the gap in the digital divide is a barrier to information, services, education, and the hope for a better future. Arch and Rodriguez concluded in their paper "Beyond Closing the Digital Divide" that the Community Technology Center (CTC) grant project begun in the 1990's did more than reduce the gap in the digital divide for the Hispanic community in Washington County, Oregon. Their CTC project demonstrated that

“technology can provide the means for economic improvement, social integration and a sense of personal empowerment.” (Arch, 2002). These CTC programs have provided the technology, staff and community based support to enabled Hispanic participants, who could not use a computer before, to create a Power Point presentation in six months. These basic computer skills along with interactive software have enabled this community to learn English, reading and writing making these participants more productive members of their community.

What steps are being taken to close the gap in the digital divide in America? President Bush in his speech with First-Time Home Buyers in New Mexico and Arizona on March 26, 2004 said “This country needs a national goal for broadband technology... We ought to have a universal, affordable access for broadband technology by the year 2007.” (President, 2004). The goal of universal access for all Americans will not be met by 2007, especially when you have seen the recent statistics from the DOC and Pew reports. New York Attorney General Spitzer in a story by Alex Bard commented on this technology issue saying “If you’re a child in South Korea, your broadband access is ten times faster and half as expensive as a kid in the South Bronx.” (Bard, 2006). The State of New York is considering taking the lead in providing universal internet access to its citizens in an effort to close the gap. Spitzer goes on to say “Internet access is no longer a luxury- it is a necessity, the state must do more.” (Bard, 2006). As citizens wait for the Federal and State governments to find a remedy for the gap in the digital divide, your local library has been taking the lead and helping to close the gap for their communities.

The Library and their Impact on the Digital Divide

Before the widespread use of computers and the internet the local library was your resource for information. This building filled with knowledgeable librarians, books, magazines,

newspaper from all over the world, and even microfiche, was the place to find answers and feed the soul. The American Library Association (ALA) website lists the milestones of their organization. The ALA milestones related to their efforts to impact the digital divide in communities across America began in 1989. At that time the ALA released this statement “Today’s public libraries and increasingly those of the future must be enabled to function within a nationwide and even global information infrastructure. In a world increasingly dependent upon knowledge and the ability to acquire it, the problems of those with limited access to information will only be exacerbated....” (Ahead to, 2003). This statement was made before the term “digital divide” was coined in the 1990’s. The ALA was a forward thinking organization. Able to grasp the impact of technology on the people and the ALA saw their role in the future clearly. As a profession the library community has made a commitment to raise the level of information services especially for Americans who need these services the most. The ALA and local libraries have made a difference since 1989 in communities all over America. Two major steps were taken in 1996 to enable public libraries to financially afford to provide computers and internet access to the public. The Telecommunications Act and the Library Services and Technology Act were passed providing federal funding for technology implementation in schools and libraries. Without funding the policy and mission statements are just talk. Money makes taking action to provide services possible. These are just a few of the milestones of the ALA in their effort to provide access to all citizens. On their website today you can go to a digital divide section and you will find this mission statement.

“Use of the Internet continues to grow rapidly but is still very uneven. Economic and literacy disadvantages, age differences, physical disabilities, and geographical differences can all create difficult barriers to access. Libraries are dedicated to providing information access to all

and have been deeply concerned about the potential for the digital revolution to leave people behind. Our agenda has had two primary focuses: fighting for policies and laws that address these issues, and helping libraries respond to the need to provide services to all their users.” (Ahead to, 2003).

There is another organization that has been a major player in the effort to provide technology and internet access to under served populations in America, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Since 1997 this foundation has provided funding, technology and software to public libraries to fill the gaps in the digital divide. In 2004 the foundation published a report entitled “Toward Equality of Access: The Role of Public Libraries in Addressing the Digital Divide”. Research advisors for the report were the Pew Internet and American Life Project. The report findings validate the success of the public library in providing a bridge over the digital divide. In 1996 only 28 percent of the public libraries provided computers and internet access for patrons and by 2001 that number jumped to over 95 percent (Toward Equality, 2004). They also found a 17 percent increase in patron visits to libraries in that same period. The computer and internet resources provided by the public library have brought patrons back when previously library support had waned in many communities. Eighty percent of the public libraries in America serve rural and inner city communities areas where the technologically disadvantaged live and need these services (Toward Equality, 2004). A quote from Toward Equality reflects on the new role of the public library, “According to a recent study conducted by the Marist College Institute of Public Opinion, Americans believe that providing computers for public use is one of the three most important things their library can do” (Toward Equality, 2004). This demonstrates that the public library knows their target market, and has taken the lead in tackling the problems associated with the computer technology that has become essential for our daily lives.

The Library Funding Dilemma

Now that our public libraries have become the leader in providing equal access to technology and information in communities nationwide, how will they afford to continue these services, maintain and upgrade technology and train staff? Providing ongoing funding to support these efforts is a problem. The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) is the federal agency responsible for providing grants to libraries and museums. The mission statement from the IMLS website states; "Its mission is to grow and sustain a "Nation of Learners" because life-long learning is essential to a democratic society and individual success." (About Us). The IMLS conducts periodic research to examine the status of their funding efforts nationwide. In January 2006 the IMLS released their latest report the "Status of Technology and Digitization in the Nation's Museums and Libraries". The report indicated that Federal grants to public libraries for technology went down 25.3 percent (Status of Technology, 2006). In fact overall funding from all sources for technology was down in 2004 (Status of Technology, 2006). The federal Technology Opportunities Program (TOP), which provided matching grants to improve community access to technology, was set to be cut from the budget in 2003 by the Bush administration (Technology, 2006). This was one of the major funding sources for public libraries, but it was not a priority for the current administration. In February 2002 the Washington Post moderated an online discussion about the budget and technology with Bruce Mehlman, Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Technology Policy, as their guest. A person from Wilbraham, Massachusetts asked Mr. Mehlman this question; "How do you think the cutting of funds that were being used to bridge the digital divide will help in fostering technology?" Mr. Mehlman answered,

“With respect to the elimination of the \$15 million TOP program to which you are probably referring, please remember that the President has laid out the Administration’s three primary goals: Winning the war on terrorism; Securing Americans at home; and Restoring economic growth to keep America working. Certainly some people don’t agree with these priorities.... But we cannot fund everything. Tough times make for tough choices” (The Budget & Technology, 2002). The TOP program was terminated as of 2004 and their website now only provides information about TOP related projects, research and reports. The funding gap that now exists for public libraries will put even more pressure on communities to provide funds to continue these technology services. Unfortunately, the communities that need technology services the most are the ones that can least afford to financially support the libraries.

An Interview with the Hagan Reference Librarian

I decided to include my own community of East Haven in the discussion of the digital divide and the efforts of the local library. I queried Fawn Murphy, the Hagan Memorial Reference Librarian and she kindly answered all my questions.

Fran Foley: Are you aware of a digital divide in East Haven in access to computer technology and access to bandwidth?

Fawn Murphy: In March, 2005 I wrote a grant attempting to justify funding for a Senior Computer Learning Center. Unfortunately the grant was turned down. I have cut and pasted some of the information that I think you may find pertinent to your first question. I have some security warnings from the e-mail program- so in case the information does not come through I will also provide it for you in an attachment. In answer to your question- I am aware of a digital divide in the senior population. The following questions were those asked by the grant reviewers;

Community Need. The community lacks a program providing free computer classes directed toward senior needs and concerns. Use of the library is confirmed by circulation statistics. Large print materials (which are mostly fiction) are borrowed by seniors with low vision difficulties. In fact in 2004, 6,719 large print items circulated compared to the total adult fiction of 13,935. So we can conclude there are many seniors using the library's *books*. These seniors however are *not* using the library's Internet/word processing computers. This has been determined by observation. They simply do not access the library's computers as frequently as younger individuals.

The library has an active senior group attending programs and participating in the library's Reader's Roundtable, Classics Book Group, and Genealogy Club. Jan Lougal, Director of the East Haven Senior Center conveyed she has received inquiries from seniors asking for computer instruction. In a survey conducted by the Hagan Library, 87% of the respondents indicated interest in Internet instruction. So, seniors use the library and are interested in computer instruction, but are missing, and will continue to miss the benefits this technology provides, if the library does not address this need and draw them in with classes suited to *their* needs and concerns.

◆ Define the target population.

This project targets active East Haven individuals age 55 and older interested in obtaining computer skills. East Haven's total population is 28,189. Over 25% are aged fifty-five or older (7,050 individuals). This percentage is higher than that of the nearby City of New Haven 17%, the state of Connecticut, 23% and the nation 21%.

The library is located within ¼ mile of the East Haven Senior Center, the Messina Drive Senior Housing Complex and the Teresa and Stewart Rest Homes.

- ◆ Describe how you have communicated with people in your target population to determine their needs.

100 East Haven seniors were polled by questionnaire (see additional information) and asked to indicate their interest in free Internet classes; topics interested in; preference for day or evening classes and if they would need transportation. (Interest in other computer programs as not polled, but some seniors indicated interest in additional computer training on the questionnaire).

Poll Results:

87 seniors indicated that “yes” they were interested in Internet classes. 13 seniors indicated “no.” 35 seniors indicated they were interested in learning to use the Internet for e-mail; 41 indicated interest in medical/drug information; 40 seniors indicated interest in genealogy; 19 in ordering products; 24 indicated interested in government benefits information; 35 were interested in travel information. Many seniors indicated multiple interests. An area was given to list “other” interests. Respondents recorded the following: Everything; - Miscellaneous/Recreation; “Research” (2 respondents); Contests; Career/Excel; Management; Basic information; History; Classmates and re-unions; Finance; Business Professional; E-Bay (2 respondents); General (2 respondents); Correspondence; “Surf the Web-a term I hear all the time.” In the category of preference for day or evening classes, 46 seniors indicated that they preferred day classes while 25 indicated evening. A number of seniors indicated “both” or “either” day or evening classes. Only 4 respondents indicated they would need transportation as noted, East Haven has a senior population higher than that of state or national percentages.

Fran Foley: What initiatives are being used at our library to close the gap in the digital divide in East Haven?

Fawn Murphy: Despite the fact that we did not obtain grant funding for a Senior Computer Center, the library went ahead and purchased additional computers. We already had a number of computers for public Internet Use- these stats can be found in Grant Excerpt 2. The additional computers we purchased were designated for Computer Training. So we now have computers for the public for Internet searching and more recently word processing. We then purchased additional computers for the purpose of actual training. I am currently running two computers training sessions- Basic - using the mouse on.... and Skills- starting with tool bars, menu bars, formatting etc. I plan to offer Internet training as well as some other classes.

Fran Foley: Do you find you must educate many patrons about basic computer skills?

Fawn Murphy: Many of the people who come in to use the Internet are already computer savvy in some of the fundamentals such as basic searching. What people do have trouble with is sending resumes, e-mail problems, and filling out forms. If what you mean by basic is using the mouse and pointer- then I would say those people are the ones who sign up for basic training rather than getting right on the public computers.

Fran Foley: How much patron training do you think you do weekly?

Fawn Murphy: Planned training such as in classes that I do is 2-4 hours weekly. The staff and other librarians also find themselves assisting in searches, problems with e-mail, and technical problems as well. In addition to the time I put into actual class time, I would estimate between all of us this would add another two to three hours of "assistance," per week.

Fran Foley: Have you found many Senior citizens asking to learn about computer technology?

Fawn Murphy: We have found this to be a frequent question- see the Grant Excerpt survey. I think I may have extrapolated this data to relate to the census data of East Haven- if you are interested in that let me know.

Fran Foley: Are there any things you want to tell me about your library and its relationship to the community?

Fawn Murphy: Not sure about this one- home Internet accessibility has decreased the use of print reference sources here at the library. The entire population does not use the library, but there is a sub-set that does. (Personal communication, June 20, 2006)

Library's Communities Future; Baby Boomers or Hispanics

The information gleaned from Ms. Murphy's answers correlates with the next project for the local library, tackling the "Senior Gap". The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) released an executive summary in September 2005 at the Library Leaders Forum entitled "Designs For Change: Libraries and Productive Aging". The title explains everything about the next focus for the library world; new services are targeted to the "Baby Boomers". We all know that the population in America is aging and the baby boomers are the target for all kinds of marketing and services. Groups participating in this forum focused on the preparations required by the library community to provide new services and programs for active senior citizens (Designs, 2005). The Boomer seniors won't need as much help with technology as past seniors, since many of them learned to use the internet before they became seniors. Some key points made as a result of this forum are that library school curricula should reflect demographics and focus on the total adult life span, a database of best practices geared toward senior need to be created and easily accessible, librarians need to harness the energies of other community organizations and agencies that are senior citizen oriented to provide well-rounded programs for the aging (Designs, 2005). If the library is turning its focus to the baby boomers, what will happen to the poor, inner city, rural and less educated people that are still on the losing side of the digital divide?

The Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Education Fund (LCCREF) released a report in September 2005 stating that “the digital divide between online Americans and those falling through the net is large and continues to grow” (New Research, 2005). LCCREF found that education and income levels did not fully explain the digital divide in some minority communities. Racial, language and cultural variables are impacting whether some groups even own a home computer. Using census data for this report, LCCREF highlights the fact that African Americans, Hispanics and Native Americans are less likely to have a home computer and internet access and income level is a minor factor in this decision. Spanish-speaking groups are the least likely to have a home computer and internet access (New Research, 2005). With eighty percent of the pages on the internet in English (Digital World, 2003), this could be the reason for a “language divide” within the internet. Wade Henderson, Counselor to LCCREF and Executive Director of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, captured the heart of the issues when he stated “The digital divide debate is not a debate about gadgets or even markets. It is a debate about who gets to speak and to hear and for what price, and to whom” (New Research, 2005). It seems the future may bring a struggle in priorities at the library between the aging Baby Boomers, who number about 82 million (Allier, 2005), and minorities, who are already on the losing side of the digital divide, but growing in numbers. The Boomers will have the advantage in the beginning because they speak English; they are the wealthiest generation in history, and currently the largest consumer segment of the population (Weiss, 2002). By 2050 the tides will turn and it is predicted that minorities will represent 40 percent of the population in America with the majority represented by Hispanics (About e-learning, 2006). But who knows what the internet will look like in 2050? There is a growing Hispanic market in the United States. The U.S. Census Bureau recently reported that Hispanic businesses are growing three times faster

than the national average and generating more than \$200 billion in annual revenue (Miller, 2006). Paul Overberg's article in *USA Today*, "After 54 Years, Baby Boom on the Wane", (as cited in *Population of Baby Boomers*, 2000), predicted the last Baby Boomer will die in the year 2070. Will minorities have to wait until they represent a larger segment of the population for the priorities of the public library to shift back to them? Hopefully the library community will recognize this second trend and adjust their plans for future services. I predict that there will be an internet that evolves and develops to capture the growing economies in the Hispanic market. The IMLS is heading in the wrong direction by solely focusing on the Boomer seniors. The IMLS and local libraries may want to teach their librarians Spanish in addition to their technology based curriculum and prepare for their growing community of Hispanic patrons.

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