The Public Library's Role in Achieving Digital Equity Through Inclusion

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December 5, 2023

Abstract

The digital divide continues to be a prevalent issue that public libraries will play an important role in supporting by fostering an environment of digital equity through inclusion within their communities. As our society becomes more and more digitally focused, and essential human services are accessed primarily online, it is more important than ever to achieve digital equity, and to eliminate barriers to access that disadvantage the most vulnerable members of society. Advocacy for the public libraries' role in supporting digital literacy in the community will continue to be a key component in bridging the digital divide.

Keywords: Digital divide; digital inclusion; digital equity; digital literacy, public libraries

Introduction

The digital divide is the gap that exists between those who have ready access to computers, the Internet and information technology and those who do not. At almost a quarter of the way through the 21st century, ready access to computers, the Internet and digital information and communication technologies has never been more important. Modern society revolves around access to information and technology, and this access has only become even more critical during the COVID-19 pandemic where many people were forced to learn and work remotely from home.

The digital divide is not simply about getting people ready access to the Internet. Rather, it is a human rights and equity issue that impacts access to essential social services, health care, and political engagement as access to these services moves online. Digital equity is also concerned about equitable access to information – a core value of the public library. Dr. Barbakoff, in the webinar *Growing Digital Equity Through Community Partnerships*, defines digital equity as the goal and digital inclusion as the process by which we can achieve that goal (Barbakoff, 2022). Barbakoff outlines three aspects to digital equity: affordable broadband, affordable devices and digital literacy. One of the American Library

Association's stated missions is "to provide leadership for the development, promotion, and improvement of library and information services and the profession of librarianship in order to enhance learning and ensure access to information for all" (American Library Association, 2008). It is clear the public library has a vital role to play in achieving digital equity. Digital inclusion and the digital divide are pervasive issues in modern society that public libraries are well positioned to support. However, support can only be achieved through adequate funding from all levels of local and federal government. As library professionals, we must advocate for these issues and the vital role the public library plays in local communities to support digital inclusion efforts.

Digital Access in 2023

The role of technology and broadband Internet access has only become more critical through the COVID-19 pandemic where many individuals were forced to learn and work remotely. At the heart of these issues is access – however, there are a variety of reasons people either cannot or decide not to connect in the digital world. Digital literacy and skills training are important aspects of this issue and again libraries are uniquely positioned to support community development in these areas. To achieve these goals, library leaders will need to continue to advocate for funding with local and federal government to help secure adequate technology and staffing resources to make an impact on the digital divide within their communities. Digital equity cannot be obtained without ready access to broadband Internet and public libraries throughout the United States have become reliable places for many people to access their online needs. In 1994 a national study found only 21% of libraries offered Internet access but by 2004 that number had grown to 99% - almost every library in the US (Grimes & Porter, 2023, p. 2). When considering access in public libraries, what is crucial looking forward is ongoing support and funding to continue to provide sufficient broadband access to meet demand and to keep available computers and technology current. This helps illustrate that the public library's role and function within the conversation of digital inclusion and equity will continue to evolve over time.

While the infrastructure for computers and broadband Internet has made great strides in the first part of this century, digital skills training must continue to be a significant focus moving forward. A survey by PLA found that 88% of public libraries provide digital literacy support – but only 42% offered formal classes (Grimes & Porter, 2023, p. 22). Barbakoff says that libraries need to focus on specific strategies to tackle digital inclusion issues and that "facilitated access" should feature prominently in this (Grimes & Porter, 2023, p. 14). Facilitated access happens when library services help lower the barrier of access to technology. An example of this access can be hybrid programming and technology classes. Offering targeting programming also helps facilitate access and lower barriers – technology classes geared towards specific age demographics are an example of this. In the United States, the Digital Equity Act, part of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, will provide states grants to support implementing digital equity plans (Grimes & Porter, 2023, p. 16). This bipartisan act represents a significant investment in meeting the needs of digital equity in the United States. Public libraries are well positioned to be great supporters in bringing digital equity plans into reality with their communities.

Equity and Human Rights Approach

The digital divide issue should not be associated with simply getting people connected online. Increasingly, the Internet has become the predominant way to access essential social, health care, banking, political, and education services. In 2016, the United Nations General Assembly declared access to the Internet as a basic human right (Sanders & Scanlon, 2021, p. 130). Although it might not be viewed in the same light as basic needs such as food and shelter there are a couple of examples in recent history that can help frame the importance of digital equity as a basic human right. In the United States the Affordable Care Act, a health care reform law enacted in 2010, primarily used an online based enrollment system (Real et al., 2015, p. 2). The law contained no funding for libraries to support additional staff training or technology and yet government officials were quoted as suggesting

individuals could use their local public libraries to enroll for services (Real et al., 2015, p. 7). This demonstrates the importance of advocacy for library services. Libraries and library services are not free – they are paid for by taxpayers and require substantial financial support from all levels of government. A more recent example, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly changed and impacted the way we operate as a society. The COVID-19 pandemic forced many people to work and attend school remotely. The challenge of this event is that many public libraries were forced to close their doors for a period during the early days of the pandemic – thus limiting access at a critical moment in history. In rural America these issues are compounded because of access to reliable broadband and people face significant inequalities related to access to essential services when compared to people in urban areas (Strover et al., 2020, p. 244). This highlights the important role the public library plays in community to support digital inclusion to help bridge the digital divide.

Digital Literacy and Adoption

Presently, adoption of digital access is arguably the most critical issue facing digital equity. Adoption rate is most significantly impacted by the issue of digital literacy. The Digital Inclusion Outlook, published by the Information Technology & Innovation Foundation, states "the digital divide is more a problem of adoption than deployment" (Dine, 2023, p. 1). An Internet Use Survey issued by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) identifies reasons for non-adoption. The most prominent reason, one that has not wavered in the period of 10 years (2011-2021) that this survey has been issued, is 'Don't Need/Not Interested'. What this survey fails to do is capture the reasons and intention behind these responses. It both captures a segment of the population that grew up without technology and see no immediate benefits in their day-to-day lives while also hiding a technology anxiety that acts as a barrier for getting people online and as a result creates an equity issue. In 2016, the World Economic Forum identified that "more than 65% of children entering primary school today will ultimately end up working in completely new job types that do not yet exist" (Grimes & Porter,

2023, p. 9). These jobs of the future will be technology focused and related digital literacy skills will only become more important to success in the workplace. Online access will only become a more integrated part of life in the 21st century and it is important that we don't leave people behind. Public libraries can break down barriers to access and support adoption by offering related programming and skills training programs.

The Future of Digital Equity and Conclusions

Public libraries have a mission to provide equitable access to information and in the 21st century this means online digital access. Public libraries will play a critical role in the future of digital equity in the United States and around the globe. Advocacy for funding from all levels of government will continue to be important in order to support ongoing staff training and development along with required technology upgrades to stay current and relevant. Public libraries should keep digital equity in focus within their strategic goals and planning. During the post COVID-19 pandemic recovery period it is more important than ever that people have baseline technology skills and equitable access to broadband Internet. Although a 100% adoption rate is unachievable, by not making connections through support there is danger of perpetuating barriers to access of essential human services. In a future where digital equity is achieved the public library will be a cornerstone of that success.

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