

**From the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond:
Libraries Bridge the Digital Divide and Help Combat Hate**

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In this interconnected digital world, there are parts of the world that still live in so-called digital darkness. Most of us cannot even imagine what it is like to not be able to surf the web or get directions on our smart phones. Yet, inequities and social injustices still are rampant today in the United States alone as if we have not evolved from our predecessors of the Civil Rights movement and it seemed that we have regressed as a nation during COVID-19 pandemic with all the political upheaval, police violence, and social unrest.

Children and teens from low-income households often feel this disparity and it can affect their learning and information literacy. Adults from low-income households are just as affected from not being able to access online employment portals, access to software that help them build their resumes to even health disparities, all because they do not have adequate Internet and a good operable computer equipment. Most just have cell phones and cell phone service which has its own limitations.

Most of us are interconnected via the Internet especially through social media, yet as more and more people get connected online some question if these interactions have become more meaningful. Do people learn and evolve from information and connections online and do they know how to discern information from fact or fiction? Therefore, information literacy also plays a big role even if the majority can access the Internet. These are the ethical dilemmas in our current standing to ponder as well as illustrating the many ways that libraries have taken the initiative to help bridge the digital divide and the injustices in their communities in the United States and abroad.

Beyond Access

Umayam (2016) explains that the digital divide exists in communities with endangered languages”, and questions, “how can an individual fully participate using or shaping digital heritage resources if they do not have the computer skills, or even the computers” (p.25)? Umayam (2016) may specifically be talking about preserving indigenous culture and languages, but the same can be true for any person who has no access to the Internet and computers living in impoverished areas from rural to urban centers (p.25). Umayam (2016) continues to say that for “all stakeholders” to participate, inclusionary measures must be set forth by libraries to offer “robust broadband services, internet-capable devices, and digital literacy skills” (p.25).

Why considering equal access simply not enough? According to Lional (2018), a Learning, Marketing and Engagement Principal Librarian at San Diego, CA, stated “But even as access to technology and the internet has increased over the last three decades, digital inequality still persists, and increasing in specific demographics” (p.13). Lional (2018) expounds that by just giving access does not address the “knowledge gap” because the root of the problem still exists which includes poverty, lack of opportunities, and skills (p.13).

However, not all home non-Internet users are from the lower socio-economic status. There are some people who simply are opting out because there is no need or interest, a growing number in a 2001-2015 study conducted by National Telecommunications and Information Administration (Lewis, 2016). There are still the groups that cannot connect because of costs. According to the study presented by Lewis (2016), Director of Minority Telecommunications Development stated, “Simultaneously, the percentage of offline households that did not use the Internet at home because of cost concerns or the lack of serviceable computer decreased by 4 and 6 percentage points, respectively”. Lewis (2016) referenced another study conducted by Morris Jr., (2016) in 2015 which broke down Internet use by age and education from 2013 to 2015 that

explains Internet usage increased among all groups by a few percentage points with a bigger increase for the 3- to 14-year-old age group by a whopping 10%. However, when focusing on Internet use by education, people who were 15 years old and older, college grads used the internet 1% less, those with some college was steady at 83%, high school grads, increased by 3%, and those with no diploma had the highest increase by 4%, implying that the less education one has, the more they use the Internet (Morris, 2016). Morris (2016) also stated that Internet usage has increased a few percentage points within minority groups from 2013 to 2015.

Yet, the digital divide is still a “set of complex issues” that cannot be agreed upon (Concro, 2016). Concro (2016), from School of Information, Pratt Institute, explains that the “digital divide” was primarily framed and measured from “access to information and communication technology (ICT), to its current more complex conceptualizations” to the “haves and have-nots”, but only in terms of “access” (p.58). Flashforward to 2020, National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) (2020) reports, “States have employed varied strategies to help keep Americans connected” and “have been key actors in getting and keeping their citizens connected to affordable broadband Internet”. Unsurprisingly, however, The COVID-19 pandemic has made the United States realize that there indeed is another crisis to contend with and that is the issue of access within the digital divide which has reared its ugly head even more and made everyone scramble to come up with fast solutions to meet the demand.

COVID-19 and the Access Crisis

Wallace (2020), an associate professor of computer science at Michigan Tech, explains in that even though there has been a push to get college courses all online, and in one particular incident, an older adult student who has been unsuccessfully tutored to use the iPad to schedule

her doctor appointments, ponders “the links between digital competency and lifetime learning become ever stronger, and as more and more of the critical functions and services of our society move primarily or wholly online, a growing number of adults are obliged to adopt and stay up to date with digital technology”. Wallace (2020) continues to state that despite the support and training, a lot of users whether by lack of resources and age due to digital incompetency, or both, will continue to be marginalized.

School aged and college students have felt the heavy burden in trying to keep up with online courses that were forced upon them because COVID-19 pandemic to reduce the spread of disease. Aside from the emotional toll they suffer from lack of face-to-face interactions, the digital divide is clear among this demographic. Although lack of access and socio-economic restraints are apparent, getting the exact number of people who have problems connecting is unclear, but it may also be due to lack of knowledge (even if students have computers at home) or internet not working that can “hinder the learning process of students and parents who are not tech savvy” (Lake & Makori, 2020).

What this boils down to is defining the words digital equity and digital inclusion to have effective policies and plans for various stakeholders. A National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) working group in 2016 came up with these definitions (Siefer, 2016):

Digital Equity Definition:

Digital Equity ensures all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy, and economy. Digital Equity is necessary for civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning, and access to essential services.

Digital Inclusion Definition:

Digital Inclusion is the activities necessary to ensure that all individuals and communities, including the most disadvantaged, have access to, and use of, information and communication technologies (ICTs). This includes 5 elements: 1) affordable, robust broadband Internet service; 2) Internet-enabled devices that meet the needs of the user; 3) access to digital literacy training; 4) quality technical support; and 5) applications and online content designed to enable and encourage self-sufficiency, participation, and collaboration. Digital Inclusion must evolve as technology advances and recognizes that access to, and use of, ICTs are an essential element for participation in our society, democracy, and economy.

Seifer (2016), Director of the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA), said that it is important to define these terms because “they are goals and steps toward achieving digital equity”.

Libraries to The Rescue

Librarians as Digital Access Warriors

Libraries have been considered a haven for people, and libraries are known to be a conglomeration of social justice warriors who manage the library as cultural hubs for people to safely meet, learn, and exchange ideas. More importantly, human rights are the focus of LIS research and practice and that “there are a number of intersections between human rights and LIS” (Mathiesen, 2015, p.1305).

In a webinar conducted by Public Library Association on April 30, 2020, entitled “Advancing Digital Equity: Public Libraries Respond to COVID-19: Strategies for Advancing Digital Equity Now” spoke with three public librarians “who shared their experiences with everything from lending laptops and mobile hotspots to low-tech solutions like using sandwich boards and direct mail to advertise library services” (American Libraries, 2020, p.14). It is astounding how many libraries met the call once the “lock down” occurred that left most of the nation from schools to business and libraries have converted their services all online practically overnight. Although libraries were already doing much of the social and digital outreach to marginalized communities beforehand, this sudden full online conversion during COVID 19, made it even more imperative that they met their communities’ needs during the time of fear and uncertainty. Even when local COVID-19 outbreaks continued to happen in some areas while public and academic libraries are contemplating reopening, libraries essentially took heed and listened to their state and local government along with their health departments for guidance in phasing in their reopening by ramping up their online and curbside services (Witeeven & Peet, 2020, pg.8).

Librarians Stand Up Against Racism

The COVID-19 pandemic stirred up a lot of fear in the United States and abroad, and because of the political rhetoric that came out during the pandemic blaming China for the outbreak of COVID-19, hate crimes against Asian Americans in the United States were violent and more insidious. In response to this, the Asian/Pacific Librarians Association (APALA) condemned the hate and bigotry by vocalizing against it joining #StopAsianHate social media

campaigns while other libraries stepped up to protect their Asian-American patrons (Witeeven & Peet, 2020, pg26).

The American Library Association (ALA) (2020) responded to anti-racism and protests for the murder of George Floyd by supporting the Black Lives Matter protests with a #LibrariesRespond action plan and campaign. ALA (2020) instructed libraries to educate themselves on Black Lives Matters and the terminology, and about “Anti-racism Work and Women and Librarianship” and the various issues about police reform, to name a few. Libraries across the country has issued anti-racism and Black Lives Matter resource guides for all to educate themselves on these pressing issues of this time.

Conclusion

Libraries and librarians nationwide have essentially become social justice warriors. They are aware of the socio-economic inequities and racial injustices and have decided to lead the way by bridging the digital divide and supporting marginalized communities in creative ways knowing digital access does not equate to digital equity. Serving communities in rural areas to urban areas are equally important because of income disparities and lack of good internet access. What falls short, however, is the outreach a library can do to provide digital access all the time but libraries as an institution for equal access are becoming more and more a beacon in the dark in more ways than one.

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