

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE & PUBLIC LIBRARIES: a first-hand view

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As a part of a research study I have been conducting over the past several months, I have visited branches of a large U.S. urban public library system and interviewed branch librarians about their resources and services. I've been to ten different branch libraries so far, and I have been stunned at the degree of variance in quality and quantity of digital resources. As a library school professor I have read numerous articles concerning the digital divide over the past decade or so and have always maintained that the problem is severe. I knew that poorer children were about three times less likely to have home computers than middle class children (Eamon, 2004), and that the Internet had served to widen the information gap between rich and poor, rather than bridge it as some had predicted (e.g. Wolf, 1998).

On the other hand, I knew that public libraries were playing a role in reducing the digital divide for poorer populations (e.g. Gates Foundation, 2004). It wasn't until I saw the digital resource discrepancies within one library system laid out so clearly before me that I came to understand the degree of unfairness that exists.

Consider two branches as examples of the inequities within this particular system:

Branch #1

This first branch is located in a middle class neighborhood where most residents hold working class or professional class jobs, and most families live in single-family dwellings. The librarian I interviewed estimated that roughly half of the households in the community have home Internet access.

The branch serves a population of about 4,800. It has six computers for the public, each new, relatively high-powered, and equipped

with flashy, over-sized flat screens. There are also four Internet-access computers just for staff use, and one more computer just for OPAC access. There is almost always a waiting list for the Internet, and use is limited to 30 minutes per day per patron.

Overall, this library has adequate digital access and can generally serve the public's needs, although more computers and longer use times would certainly benefit patrons without home computers.

Branch #2

This branch is located in an impoverished inner-city neighborhood where the average household income is well below the poverty level. It sits on a block in which a number of the buildings are abandoned. A large portion of the community is unemployed, living in government-assisted housing, and/or homeless.

This little branch library, no larger than a store in a strip mall, is the only local library for a community of 45,000 people, making its service area the largest of any branch library in the city. Although the librarian I interviewed stated that virtually no community households have computers, the library has dismal digital resources. It has only three computers available for public use, and no computers for staff use. These three computers are old cast-offs from another library, and only one of the three works. That means that this one, slow, out-of-date computer provides computer/Internet access for a community of 45,000, as well as for the entire library staff. Computer-assisted reference is out of the question since a member of the public is almost always using the computer. Few of the schools in the neighborhood have libraries, much less plentiful computers with Internet access, so the public library is really the only place to use computers. But there aren't any worth using.

The Digital Divide in Public Libraries

Based on what I've seen, there are at least three factors leading to branch-by-branch inequities within this public library system. I know only part of the story, so there are probably additional factors, but these three were the most evident during my visits.

First, library resources are unevenly distributed among communities within the same library system. This may be due to increased community lobbying power, increased community voice, or increased community library use histories, but the libraries serving the neighborhoods with the most economic strength seem to get the best quality and greatest number of resources. This is true not just of the two branches I described above, but of all ten I have visited.

Second, private residents in communities with greater economic power augment library-provided resources. For example, the librarian at Branch #2 said that recent system-wide budget cuts were having a drastic effect on her collection development efforts; her subsistence collection was getting even thinner. I asked the librarian at Branch #1 about the effect of budget cuts on her collection. “There haven’t really been any,” she explained. “The Friends of the Library has donated money to make up for lost funds.”

Thirdly, local commercial entities support libraries in communities with economic power. Commercial businesses have an interest in promoting themselves to populations that can pay for their goods and services. At Branch #1, the beautifully decorated and furnished children’s area was called the “Verizon Children’s Area,” and a sign on the front door boasted about a recent \$1,000 donation from a commercial retail chain with a store in the area. Few large businesses and commercial chains open franchises in impoverished areas where there is little discretionary spending, so corporate donations to underprivileged urban libraries are much rarer.

An Example of a Privileged Suburban Community Library

As stunning as the digital inequities between Branch #1 and Branch #2 are, the situation is even more dramatic when these two urban libraries are compared to a public library in a privileged suburban area. Take my own local public library as an example. Located outside the city that is home to Branch #1 and Branch #2, it has median family income of about \$90,000. With average house prices at \$233,000, property tax support for public libraries (and public schools) results in relatively large budgets, enabling the purchase and maintenance of topnotch computers and computer resources.

At my library, which serves a population of about 28,000, there are 50 computers for the public (not including 12 OPAC-only terminals) as well as a large number of computers just for staff use. There are public computers just for checking e-mail, public computers just for accessing Web-based propriety databases, public computers for general Web surfing, and an entire room of public computers for all of these uses. There are almost always more public computers available than people who want to use them, partly because there are so many computers, but also because almost every member of the community has computer and Internet access at home. And at work. And at school.

What Does it all Mean?

It is not my intention to criticize the urban public library system profiled above; it is a good system that does the best job it can within its resource limitations. I am profiling these three libraries to show that the digital divide is more than just a question of fairness or convenience. With respect to public libraries, the digital divide means that the people who most need access are the least likely to be able to get it at their local public library. Looking just at population served per computer, my library offers one computer for about every 560 community residents, as opposed to one for every 45,000 in the case of Branch #2. That means that users of my library are about 80 times more likely to be able to find an available computer upon entering the library than users of Branch #2. And keep in mind that users of my local library are far more likely to have computers at home, work, and school. Computer and Internet access can make real differences in people's lives and can leave those without access at a serious disadvantage.

For example, while I was at Branch #1, I observed a man desperately trying to type a resume within his half hour computer time limit. He couldn't complete it in time, of course. He explained to the librarian that just that morning he had managed to get a job interview for that afternoon, and he wanted to bring a resume. Sadly, he left empty-handed after the librarian explained, apologetically, that there was a two-hour waiting list before she could let him have another half hour on a computer (and even that would have broken the 30 minutes per day rule).

If he had lived in my suburban town, this man would have had enough time on a library computer to complete his resume, and he could have walked into his interview much more likely to walk away with a job.

Anyone who says we don't have economic class privileges in the United States has never looked closely at, and truly seen, our public library system and the great digital divide it reflects.

Works Cited

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