

THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC INTERNET ACCESS: A FEW PERSPECTIVES THROUGH THE (PUBLIC) LIBRARY LENS

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Here are a few notes that will constitute the core of my remarks at the session on “The Future of Public Internet Access” on Friday afternoon.

- Libraries and Public Internet Access: Current State
 - Basic technology: From the 1990s, libraries have emphasized hardware, software, and networking to provide the functionality that most users need. Libraries have made good progress, with many exemplary BTOP projects helping to propel us forward, such as those in Texas highlighted at this conference. Of course, there are significant challenges, both in trying to provide the ever-increasing broadband speeds needed, sustaining current and emerging bandwidth-intensive services (such as streaming video and video conferencing), and supporting and leveraging mobile technologies. Despite gains in access speeds in 2012, about 40 percent of libraries still report that these connection speeds are insufficient to meet patron needs some or most of the time. Ensuring adequate internet access for their patrons remains a top priority for public librarians.
 - Content: As more content is made available in digital forms, licensing regimes increasingly become a gatekeeper to access (as compared to copyright law for analog materials). For public libraries, the licensing problem with respect to e-books has emerged as a critical problem in the past few years. The most publicized problems are high prices (that are sometimes a multiple of the consumer price) and the inability to purchase some titles at any price. But other problems exist as the usual e-book license with a publisher or distributor often constrains or altogether prohibits libraries from archiving and preserving content, making accommodations for people with disabilities, ensuring patron privacy, receiving donations of e-books, or selling e-books that libraries do not wish to retain.
 - Digital Fluency: Most attention, whether by libraries in general or within the rubric of a BTOP project, has been on the lower end of the digital literacy range. This has been an important focus, as there are many people with only modest or no facility with the digital world and its technology. While emphasis has been on the immediate problem of bringing non-adopters online, the flood of high-end content creation and production technologies let alone social networking platforms, presents additional challenges for providers of digital literacy training and support. The biggest and most difficult problems in terms of public internet access may well reside in the upper end of the cognitive spectrum as more of the public gains access to advanced technologies and must be fluent in their use to participate fully in the knowledge society. If not addressed, we risk a widening digital chasm between digitally fluent haves and have-nots.

- Overall: It is a mixed bag. Libraries are pleased with the progress, but see formidable challenges on the horizon.
- The Continuing Increase in Choice... and Complexity
 - Choice is good—to some degree. But choice does increase complexity, so that more choices can be dysfunctional for some people and purposes if complexity is increased such that people are unable to cope with it.
 - The letter (example): Once upon a time, people wrote letters or notes with paper and pen or with a typewriter. Then there was email based on a local computer system. Then email was served from the cloud. Then came texting, tweets, blog posts, article and blog comments, and voice mails as emails. Then social media became mainstream, providing another form of communication with the built in feature of integrating other forms of communication (e.g., photos).
 - The e-book (example): Once upon a time, people read print books. You buy it; you borrow it; user interface is obvious. By contrast: E-books use multiple formats and devices that largely are not interoperable. Libraries are prohibited from purchasing some publishers' e-books. Systems to find e-books can be different from those used to actually download them. The operational systems to download e-books often are not easy to use (this is a common complaint from library users).
 - Libraries: How well libraries will be able to address this choice and complexity challenge—the digital literacy question at the higher-end of the cognitive spectrum—on a widespread basis is a major question and challenge for the future.
- Contemplation
 - Constant access to information enabled by digital devices has many obvious upsides, but it also exacts costs in terms of attention and productivity. As one example, smartphones provide mobile Internet access, but reinforce the high-velocity, always-on, short burst communications regime on the rise in the last two decades.
 - Enabling contemplative activity has been core to libraries for decades. Examples of thoughtful activities include individual reading, of course, but also providing support for student research, career exploration, children's storytelling hour, small business marketing research, and book groups.
 - Contemplative activities are important to creative and analytical thought, global competitiveness, and ultimately a high quality of life and therefore should be encouraged.
 - We mistakenly conflate information gathering (grazing) with information processing (digesting) at our peril.
 - Can libraries (and others!) manage and encourage contemplation in this era of information velocity? How does this velocity and “always on” reality implicate what we should want from future public internet access?
- Broadening from Information Access to Information Production (And Still Access Too)
 - Implicit to explicit: Until recently, libraries perceived a limited role for themselves in information production (except for producing information that enables access to other information, such as reader recommendations and guides to library databases).
 - Many libraries are now viewing information production as a key and growing part of their mission.

- The most recent popular example is maker spaces. Other examples include digital media labs, local history digitization and access portals, centers for community news, and digitization projects generally.
- Important future roles may include the library serving as a publisher to local authors, with support for the research, writing, editing, and production phases, as well as serving as the repository and point of access for such works and assistance with marketing.
- Collaboration and Integration: From Trend to Mainstream Practice for Libraries
 - With the ability to search and find information in your pocket, there is a decline in the specialness of “mere” access to information and basic internet access: In the future, libraries will need to increase their focus on value-added services: marrying technology, information, and community-relevant services.
 - Technology access
 - In-building: Certainly libraries will need to have more robust broadband and adopt other technological advances. Libraries remain a critical (and often the only) public internet access point for people with no alternatives, and serve as the access point for higher-end technology that many people don’t have at home—ranging from gigabit networks to 3D printing.
 - Library services outside the building, and the implications for technology access: As more library services are provided online, libraries increasingly expand beyond its walls. Several BTOP projects included mobile computer labs and/or cybermobiles. Does this foreshadow a big return of the bookmobile, or perhaps an enhanced version with area wi-fi?
 - Advocacy: One important effort is the Edge Benchmarks initiative. A coalition of major library and non-library organizations is working to develop benchmarks that will serve as a tool to help libraries advocate for greater technology and related support from local officials. This effort is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.
- Conclusion
 - For libraries, questions about the future of public internet access cannot be separated from the larger questions of the role of libraries in the future information ecosystem.
 - Regardless of future directions of technology, the library will retain its important role of providing access to people without any alternatives and the librarian role as guide and teacher to support technology use.
 - But, a significant opportunity is at hand in maximizing the value-add for communities... beyond cost shifting (just saving money) for library users.
 - There are huge opportunities and challenges for libraries. The only certainty is that the status quo won’t last...
- References
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