Libraries and Public Internet Access: Current Status and Future Directions

- A System…
  - Basic Technology
  - Content
  - Digital Fluency
- Overall: A mixed bag. Pleased with progress but formidable challenges ahead.
  - The “future”
Basic Technology

- From the 1990s, focus on hardware and software and then basic network connectivity
- Gates and E-rate
- BTOP and Gates
- Much progress…
- But still about 40 percent of libraries report that their broadband speeds are insufficient to meet user demands
Content

- Licensing regimes increasingly an obstacle as digital content is contracted not sold
- Most critical problem in past few years for public libraries = e-books
  - Inability to purchase
  - High prices
  - Litany of other problems: Disabilities, privacy, archiving and preservation…
Digital Fluency

- Much of the library focus on digital literacy has been on lower end of range, with good reason.
- Marked increase in the capabilities of technologies and devices, forms of content, and online services highlight critical need for a focus on higher-level digital literacy.
- Proficiency at the upper end of the spectrum is needed to fully participate in the knowledge society.
More Choice, More Complexity

- Choice is good, but many choices mean complexity, which may be desirable or dysfunctional
- The very brief story of the letter
- The sad tale of the e-book
- A major library challenge for the future: How well can we address the digital literacy question at the higher-end of the cognitive spectrum
Contemplation

- What is this “contemplation”?
- Changes in communication in the past decade or two
  - High velocity
  - Always on
  - Short bursts of information
- The “information diet”
  - How unhealthy are we? Or becoming?
Contemplation: Why Is It Important?

- We mistakenly conflate information gathering (grazing) with information processing (digesting)
- Decline in contemplation exacts costs in terms of attention and productivity
- Thoughtful activities are important to creative and analytical work, global competitiveness, and ultimately a high quality of life
Contemplation: Role of Libraries and Future Public Internet Access

- Contemplative activities have been core to libraries for decades
  - Many examples: the obvious one of promoting reading but also supporting student research, small business development, career development…

- The intersection: Promoting contemplation and more library services on the internet
  - What can/should we do?
  - Beyond libraries: What about the technology sector broadly? Technology design is not neutral
Broadening to Information Production

- Until recently, libraries perceived a limited role in information production
  - Implicit support
  - Library-specific purposes
- Now view information production as key and a growing part of agenda
  - Maker spaces is the current popular example
  - Others: Past, present, and future
- Implications for future public internet access??
Collaboration and Integration

- Increasing focus to marry technology, information, and community-relevant services

- Technology access (in-building)
  - Will need more robust broadband and adoption of new technologies
  - Remain critical (and often only) access point for people with no alternatives
  - Serve as access point for higher-end technology that many people don’t have at home
Library services outside of the building
- As more services are provided online, more users are accessing them from outside of the building
- Several BTOP projects included mobile computer labs/cybermobiles; Philly hotspots
- Big return of bookmobile, enhanced version with area wi-fi? Something else?

Edge Benchmarks Initiative
Conclusion

- The future of public internet access cannot be separated from the future of libraries generally
  - What is the best value-add for communities?
- Regardless, library will retain important role of providing access to people without alternatives and librarian role as guide & teacher to support tech use
  - Trustworthy, unbiased, community-focused, technology agnostic
- There are huge opportunities and challenges
  - Erate 2.0 / Sen. Rockefeller, etc.
- We don’t have many answers – we need your help!!!
References

- **Confronting the Future**: Strategic Visions for the 21st Century Public Library, June 2011.
- **Restoring Contemplation**: How Disconnecting Bolsters the Knowledge Economy, March 2012.
- **Edge Benchmarks** Initiative, Ongoing.
- U.S. Public Libraries and the BTOP, Forthcoming, Spring 2013, ALA OITP