

The Future of Public Internet Access: A Few Perspectives Through the Library Lens

*Digital Inclusion in Texas
Conference and Colloquium*

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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**

Collaboration and Integration (2)

- **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

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- ▣ [Digital Literacy, Libraries, and Public Policy](#): Report of the Office of Information Technology Policy's Digital Literacy Task Force, January 2013.
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