The Role of Libraries in Narrowing the Gap Between the Information Rich and Information Poor.

A Brief Overview on Rural Communities.

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Abstract

The development of computer technologies lead to the widespread use of these technologies in communications and social relations. An information gap has been created between those who have access to the information technologies and those who do not have access. Rural communities isolated geographically are among the least connected groups. This paper overviews some of the issues involved in connecting these rural communities to the information world and the role of libraries in bridging this information gap.
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“Information is a basic human right and the fundamental foundation for the formation of
democratic institutions” Nelson Mandela

Today’s information poor or information have-nots can be identified in five categories: 1. economically disadvantaged groups in developing countries; 2. rural populations geographically isolated; 3. disadvantaged groups by cultural and social poverty; 4. minority groups; and 5. the physically disabled. (Kagon, ¶ 4) A closer look in the information needs and challenges of rural communities and the role of libraries in these communities will serve as a snapshot of the information gap problem that is as big and complex as each group mentioned above.

The concept of an “information society” first appeared in the 1960’s but it was the 1990’s that saw a more tangible face of this society due to the advancement of telecommunication and computer technologies followed by an increasing usage of these technologies by larger parts of society. There are many views of what the term “information society” means (Martin, p. 5) but for the purpose of this paper the term “information society” is used to characterize the existence of a wide spectrum of information available through the advancement of technology.

Access to this technology will have great impact on individuals, and it will be the means used to measure the gap between the information rich and the information poor. Martin (2005), in his article “Information Society Revisited: From Vision to Reality,” summarizes the problem:

“for all those who proclaim the Information Society as providing the answer to social inequality, poverty and unemployment there are others who would regard it as likely to widen the gap between information haves and have-nots and to maintain existing socio-
economic disparities.” (p.5)

One of the ramifications of this information-rich society will be an “economy based on the production, distribution and use of knowledge and information as the main drivers of growth, wealth creation and employment across all industries.” (Martin, p. 6) This concept exposes the reality that the use of technology soon may not be, and in some instances already is not, an option for members of society in general. For example, an increasing amount of jobs “will require skills with technology,” and as government agencies rely more on computers and online services, many “transactions between individuals and the government including such services as delivery of food stamps, Social Security benefits, and Medicaid information will take place electronically.” (Goslee, ¶18) Another simple but crucial example is that of companies such as those making their job applications available through their websites. In some cases this is the only way a job seeker is able to search and apply for positions in those companies. These examples show how the information poor, i.e., the ones without access to the new means of information technology, will be greatly affected by the lack of technology access and how social inequalities can increase as a consequence.

There are innumerous complexities in trying to bring the information poor at speed with the information society and many projects are under way to solve some of the issues involved. Libraries acting within their scope of information providers will play a key role in bridging the information gap. However, before trying to reach any of the information-poor groups, work will have to be done inside the libraries to make them a readily available and competent resource of information. Librarians will have to adapt to the “new” means of information delivery in order to effectively fulfill their roles as information providers. They will have to become more and more comfortable with the new information technologies as they are with browsing a book or
using its index to find information. In addition, librarians will be the ones “qualifying [the] reliance on new technology, keeping it in its place as a means rather than an end in itself.” (Rosser-Hogben, p. 34) This point is especially important for rural libraries because the lack of technology infrastructure is still one of the biggest barriers for access of information by the rural communities. However, libraries will need to work closely with their communities to show that access to technology by itself will not be enough to bridge the digital divide.

According to the article “Libraries in the Digital Age: Bridging the Gap Between Information haves and have-nots,” 95% of public libraries offer Internet access to their patrons. (¶ 3) However, “rural public libraries continue to lag behind their urban and suburban counterparts” says a study sponsored by the American Library Association, the U. S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science and the Gates Library Foundation. (Encouraging Public Access and Use, ¶ 17). The gap is also broader for the ownership of home computers with the rural poor being the least connected. (Falling Through the Net, ¶ 18) By offering public access to these technologies, rural libraries will be working towards diminishing the information gap in their communities.

But one important characteristic of rural communities is that residents may live in large geographical areas where access to one central building may not be the most reasonable accommodations. Although a central library building is necessary, rural libraries will have to go beyond their walls if they are to truly reach all their potential users.

To make information services available to those farther away, rural libraries can make use of two essential services. Librarians can serve many of their patrons through a telephone reference service. A distance reference service is crucial for communities spread through large geographical areas as well as to serve the older members of the community who are not able to
come to the library as easily. Another necessary service will be a computerized bookmobile that would circulate through the most distant areas, offering not only books but also computer access for several purposes including online access. (Rosser-Hogben, p. 34).

Information instruction is another service that rural libraries will have to readily provide to their communities. By information instruction here is meant regular instruction on how to use the new technologies but most importantly guidance on how information seekers can make best use of the large amount of information available to them. Because the changes occurring in the rural workplace, including the switch “over to computerized systems for their operations” (Rosser-Hogben, p. 30) by more rural manufacturers, rural libraries will have to invest in basic computer training for the less privileged members of their communities. Besides, rural communities can benefit from long-distance learning, and their libraries can be the portals for those looking for advancing their education. Abid’s statement (p. 2) that libraries providing “access to information alone will not be enough” holds true for rural libraries as well. He goes on explaining that “other needs must also be addressed, such as developing appropriate contents as well as building human capacities and technical skills conductive to translating knowledge and information into assets of empowerment and production.” (p. 2) This will be the ultimate goal of rural libraries in fulfilling their role as information providers.

Rural libraries will still provide the more traditional library services to their users, such as children and young adult programs, book clubs, and after school programs with homework help. In small communities, libraries should also be a “gathering place”. This is an important way to reinforce the library as an active and important part of its community. Also, rural libraries should encourage the community members volunteering their time in the library, offering training in general library work. By encouraging community involvement, libraries will be creating partners
and advocates from their own communities. Also, what better way of recognizing members of the community that could become librarians themselves, “growing” their next generation of workers within their own communities?

By seeking to bridge the technological gap in their communities through the access to information technologies combined with more traditional library services, rural libraries will be actively involved in their communities, bridging the information divide, bringing their communities up to date to the global society that they are already part of. There are many other ways rural libraries will work to transform the information poor into information rich. Also, issues concerning budget and funding are crucial for any of the suggested projects and will have to be addressed as well. The process is complex but the hope is that as technology becomes less expensive and more accessible (Morehead, p. 135), the work of libraries will not be focused as much in offering the technology but in training information users for a lifetime of decision making and knowledge use in their lives. This will be the most important skill of the future—to be able to deal with the growing amount of information in a critical way; rural libraries will definitely need to be part of the process if they are to make a difference in their communities.
References


