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# Access for All: Public Library Contributions to Civic Connectivity

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The readiness factors for “wired” civic engagement are infrastructure, content, and training. American public libraries, particularly those in metropolitan areas, are helping communities build the infrastructure, organize and link content, and provide the training that result in a connected community. This article highlights the continuing role of the urban public library in promoting equitable access to information, linking citizens with local government and community services, and improving the competencies of all community residents in accessing, using, and creating virtual community resources.

Supported by a mix of private, public, and foundation funding, the urban public library is equipping its facilities downtown and in the neighborhoods with the technological tools that ensure public access to electronic information and the Internet. The development of this infrastructure is tied to new library buildings springing up in neighborhoods and downtowns across the country, sometimes in joint use with other community service providers and, increasingly, with intense community involvement.

Metropolitan libraries are supporting, alone and in collaboration, development of content on library Websites that organize and link people to a menu of current information resources on government, community and private sector agencies, and nonprofit organizations. The number of links to local, regional, and national information sources on library Websites is soaring. Content is being arranged to facilitate information seeking by diverse users.

The biggest challenge facing the community in this era of rapid technological change is to make technological tools available while ensuring and facilitating their use. Understanding the gap in competencies and comfort in the use of technology and electronic information, many urban public libraries are developing in-house or collaborative training with community partners for a range of audiences: children, teens, families, seniors, the underemployed and unemployed, small businesses, students, and lifelong learners. With the influx of new Americans to metropolitan areas, the public library is offering

multilingual online sources and services that disseminate important civic information on the new American neighborhood and ties to the “home” community across the globe.

The ultimate impact of the urban public library in building community access to electronic information is revitalization of the library as a community place. Betty Jane Narver, executive board chair of the Urban Libraries Council, an association of 130 public libraries in major national metropolitan centers, says that “even as our public libraries are rapidly responding to the challenges of the new technology, they are becoming stronger community learning places. They have always been welcoming and generous places where people can find one-on-one help, whatever their information or learning needs might be. Today, libraries are the places where people can ask questions, receive help in finding answers, get training, and learn to feel comfortable in the use of technology and electronic information. Libraries, without abandoning their powerful traditional roles, are now using new tools to link people to the community resources that are available to them.”

### **Building the Infrastructure for Access**

Access for all is a traditional core value of the American public library. In the past, this has meant free, equitable and private access to sources of information inside the library, funded primarily with taxpayer revenues. Adding digital access has challenged the public library to continue its print collection development while investing in equipment and services that support new digital resources.

The urban public library has been an early community adopter of technology, first moving its internal functions and operations to automated, networked services; and acquiring public-access computers, software, and digitized collections. A study commissioned by the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science shows an overall increase in public library connectivity by more than 21 percent between 1998 and 2000. Massive deployment of public library Internet connectivity plans has resulted in 97.7 percent of urban public libraries and 97.3 percent of suburban libraries offering Internet access to the public.<sup>1</sup> The average number of public library public-access Internet terminals is 17.3 per site, with a range from 1 to 700. In suburban libraries, the average is 8.7 terminals, with a range of 1 to 220.

Libraries have received help in funding this digital infrastructure from a variety of public, private, and foundation sources. Federal funding has come from sources such as the E-rate program, which reimburses providers for above-cost services extended to high-cost urban and rural areas; the Telecommunications and Information Infrastructure Assistance Program (TIIAP), which has sponsored planning, demonstration, and access projects designed to ensure equal public access; and state block grant funding through the Library Services Construction Act and Library Services and Technology Act. State-level pro-

grams, such as the Texas Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund (TIF), have also been developed to help states and cities compete in the information economy.

Cities have adopted bond issues, launched sales tax initiatives, and tapped tax increment financing districts to develop “wired” communities. For example, in Memphis, Tennessee, a \$100 million Information Hub initiative has been launched to improve the new central library with technology and digital information resources. In Chicago, the Neighborhoods Alive plan for improvements to sixty-three of its seventy-eight branch library facilities represents a deliberate strategy to “wire” neighborhoods through key public investments in buildings and technology. In Providence, Rhode Island, a \$30 million initiative, *Expanding Possibilities*, includes support for operating programs that partner with schools, address the digital divide, and provide new-American and family literacy services, in addition to library facility improvement.<sup>2</sup>

Foundation investments have also greatly affected community access through investment in public library technology centers. For example, by the end of 2000, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation had already invested \$83 million in its U.S. initiative to wire fifty-six hundred public libraries in low-income communities with more than twenty-five thousand computers. Many other national, regional, and local foundations are contributing to public library projects and programs that further public access to computers and the Internet.

The public library is also working with the private sector on infrastructure development. In Youngstown, Ohio, the library is working with the high-tech sector to build a high-speed network with a business incubator to foster growth of that sector in the region. Many of the corporate high-tech players in Seattle have been instrumental in helping the public library develop the technology plan for the new central library facility designed by Rem Koolhaas.

In addition to infrastructure development inside its buildings, the public library is developing innovative approaches to deploy mobile technology labs. Again in Memphis, the traditional bookmobile has been transformed into an “info bus,” taking access to print and online materials in multiple languages to underresourced communities. The Multnomah County Library, serving the Portland, Oregon, area, has developed *Cyber Seniors*, a special outreach project created to teach senior citizens to use computers and, by bringing portable computers to senior citizen centers, offer peer instruction and guidance on learning to navigate and find Internet-based information.

The urban public library is an integral part of the community’s infrastructure for connectivity. Additionally, it has gained important experience in operating community technology access sites, working with community partners such as schools and nonprofit organizations to serve a diverse and growing number of technology users. This experience and capacity is important for a community adapting to new forms of information and civic exchange.

## Organizing Content for Virtual Community Connection

The library has always been the place where worlds reside—on paper. Today, it creates and organizes worldwide, Web-based information that promotes connection to local resources for civic information and engagement.

The library first began collecting and organizing community information during the urban unrest of the 1960s, arising from the desire to respond to community needs and foster collaboration among community service agencies. The focus was on linking community residents with local support resources.<sup>3</sup> Through the years, community information librarians have adopted new technologies, including database and geographic information systems, to design, organize, and deliver community information online.

The most recent inventory of best practices in community information sites is available at the University of Michigan's Website for the project "How Libraries and Librarians Help" ([www.si.umich.edu/libhelp/best.htm](http://www.si.umich.edu/libhelp/best.htm)).<sup>4</sup> The broad categories developed for the inventory demonstrate the breadth of organized content being developed and made available to the public on library Websites: "agency/local government content," "community information databases," "access issues/digital divide," digitized collections," "geographic information systems," "partnerships," "public library-community network initiatives," and "interactive community information or community network features."

Most urban public libraries have organized their Websites to connect users to broad categories of local and regional information within one to three mouse clicks. Moving toward ease of search and use, library sites are using multiple systems, including directories and search engines. For example, in Minnesota the Hennepin County Public Library's "eLibraries" connect users in one click on the home page to such link "centers" as FamilyLinks, LawLinks, KidLinks, SeniorLinks, WorldLinks, LearningLinks, and so forth. Within each center there are further directories and search functions.

Content for the public library Website is being developed locally to meet local information and learning needs. Although librarians and information technology staff are important resources for developing and maintaining sites, they are working closely with community, government, business, and information vendors to develop content. In Providence, the public library helps the city design and maintain the Child Opportunity Zone Information Network as part of a community effort to enhance awareness and use of community resources for families and youth. In Baltimore County, the public library is working with the County Department of Economic Development to offer demographic and business information online.

An important aspect of making Web-based community information easy to use is organizing for market segments. On the "Cleveland Links Library," you can search for Cleveland community information by subject under a variety of topics; each search can be further narrowed by clicking on "new sites" (recently added links) or "Sites Good4Kids." Responding to the borough's ever-changing immigrant constituency, the Queens Borough Public

Library, with support from AT&T, has developed WorldLinQ, a global portal that features journals, literature, and information in Chinese, French, Korean, Spanish, and Russian, and a directory of immigrant-serving agencies. The Seattle Public Library's catalogue of community information resources, available in English and Spanish, has been organized for teens and parents alike.

The urban public library's Website is introducing the community to complex technology tools in ways that relate to people's everyday activities. The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, whose operating budget supports the community information network Three Rivers Free-Net, offers regional nonprofit and government agencies the opportunity to share their stories by way of no-cost Websites. New nonprofit organization links, only one section of the Three Rivers Free Net, have expanded from 170 in 1997 to 1,295 today.

Similarly, the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore has a "Neighborhood Information Resources" section on its Web page, promoting community use of geographic-based information systems. The section allows access to metropolitan and neighborhood maps on demographic and environmental data and links users to neighborhood planning and mapping tutorials.

Web-based library information is increasing public access to and use of sources of community information that once required a great effort to gather and view. The Denver Public Library's collection of resources on the history of the American West, and Nashville's archives on the civil rights movement, are two examples where historical materials, including rare manuscripts, photographs, and personal letters, can now be accessed from both remote and library-based computers. The St. Louis Public Library's "Electronic City Hall" is organized for citizens who want to do business in the city, follow the progress of pending legislation, or research past legislation. The Seattle Public Library has a directory of online municipal codes from cities all over the country, so that citizens have an easy way to compare local codes with those in other municipalities.

Interactive Web features, leading the movement toward truly wired civic engagement, are also evident on library Websites. In Seattle, the library Website solicits community comments and recommendations on the new central facility. The Boston Public Library has launched a pilot interactive online tutor program with real-time teen homework help. This past year has seen an explosion in the number of public libraries deploying online, interactive, twenty-four/seven reference search services.

## **Training and Commitment to Human Development**

Much of the discussion of community access to and adoption of technology is centered on the ease and importance of remote use. Many of the fears being expressed reflect the assumption that technology may result in increased social isolation and insufficient engagement in civic activities. Studies such as

the Pew Internet and American Life Project are dispelling those fears, showing that Internet users engage in social activity just as frequently as nonusers. A survey for America Online and *American Demographics* indicates that social relationships are actually strengthened by online use.<sup>5</sup>

The experience of the public library in the digital age corroborates the evidence that technology strengthens social relationships. The urban public library is seeing a tremendous amount of use by new constituencies because of the new technology resources: seniors who come to use e-mail, teens who come to surf the 'Net and complete homework assignments, and small business owners who come to use expensive finance and business planning databases.

The latest National Telecommunications and Information Administration study reports that the digital inclusion rate is rapidly increasing in the United States, with more than half of all households having computers.<sup>6</sup> It also counts fifty-one million people who used the Internet only outside the home. Of those, 1.9 percent report having access only through the public library. Certain groups, such as African Americans (2.9 percent), Asian and Pacific Islanders (2.3 percent) and the unemployed (4.3 percent), are more likely to use the public library for access.

For an urban public library serving a low-income population, the digital divide is not a concept but a reality; the new users often represent the demographics of technology have-nots. For example, at Teen'scape, a technology center at the Los Angeles Public Library's downtown location, a large part of everyday users are young minority males. Libraries have gained important insights on how to attract new users. An important reason the Teen Central cybercenter in Phoenix is so popular for this same user group is that, in the design and build-out, the library and its architect involved city teens intensively. From drawing "dream" centers to picking out furniture and fabrics, teens helped plan and celebrate the birth of their special place.

The deep understanding that a public library gains in developing the technology competencies and comfort of its own staff aids its understanding of and ability to have an impact on technology use in and by the communities it serves. A quick survey of urban public library Websites points to an array of training programs available to serve the learning needs of both the general public and special populations. Many libraries are staffing up and creating technology training centers in addition to public-access cybercenters to handle the increasing demand for training.

These computer training programs reflect the needs of local users. For example, the Broward County (Florida) Public Library's "information gateway" training menu is targeted at the growing number of Hispanics and seniors in the community. Computer classes are offered, in English, and Spanish, on basic computer literacy, creating a Website, e-mail, finding genealogy information, government and health information, online auctions, investment and job information, news and current events, software programs, and writing résumés. In

partnership with federal, state, and local service providers, many urban public libraries have developed a number of specialized training and literacy services for workforce agency clientele and adult learners having English as a second language. In St. Paul, Minnesota, and elsewhere, traditional library services such as story time are scheduled to coincide with job search counseling and support for parents.

The Get Smart—Get Connected project at the Brooklyn Public Library, using more than 850 public-access computers, holds free computer and Internet training for people of all ages. Among the regularly offered programs are Homework Help; Internet for Families; Education and Job Information; Introduction to the World Wide Web for Adults, Teens, and Children; and online research. This project is proving effective in reaching minorities, families with children, teens, single-parent households, and those of low economic means who are not able to invest in a home computer. It is also proving important in stimulating community collaboration and enhancing links between community information and service providers and community residents.

In these ways, the infusion of technology-based products and services has enhanced the library's role as a safe place and neutral ground. The directors of the new teen spaces in Los Angeles and Phoenix report that not only are record numbers of inner-city youths coming to their new exciting spaces but these young people are sharing computers, honoring the rules, and expressing appreciation for the resources. Virtually none of the initial fears (gang-related activities, inappropriate use of Internet search) have been realized. Instead, libraries are giving teens a new safe place to meet, and new ways to develop their voices. A number of public library-supported teen Websites with teen-produced content are appearing. Teen technology tutors are becoming a highly effective means of providing effective training to teen computer users. Indeed, there may be an institutional revolution in the making because of the impact of technology. At the Free Library of Philadelphia, youths employed as teen tech assistants have now lobbied successfully to change their job description to teen leadership assistant, reflecting the growing responsibilities they are assuming and the growing status of their jobs in the library.

### **Getting There: The Connected Community**

The urban public library experience demonstrates how a community builds connection in the digital age while maintaining its important traditional role as a free, accessible, safe community place. The development of infrastructure, community information, and training is bringing community service providers and libraries together, as well as stimulating this important civic institution to reach out to the community and connect with citizens in powerful new ways. Libraries understand how to prepare and sustain virtual civic engagement as a critical part of community development. With their wealth of experience, public libraries have important lessons to share with their communities and their partners.

## Notes

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