

What More Can We Do to Address Broadband Inequity and Digital Poverty?

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We are now almost seven months into our new lives with the novel coronavirus and over 190,000 Americans have died of COVID-19. Library administrators have been struggling with their commitment to provide services to their communities while keeping their staff safe.

Initially, libraries relied on their online offerings, so more e-books and other online resources were acquired. Staff learned that they could do quite a bit of their work from home. They could still respond to email and phone messages. They could evaluate and order new material. They could deliver online programs like summer reading and story time. They could interact with people on social media. They could put together key resources for patrons and post them on the website.¹

A lot of what the library was doing while the buildings were closed was not obvious. Most people associate the library with the building and since the building was closed... it seemed like nothing was happening at the library. Yet, library workers were busy.

Once it became possible for library staff to enter the building (per local health ordinances), the first thing that libraries started to do was accept returns. That was a little fraught considering how little we knew about the virus and how long contaminants might live on returned library material. Eventually with the long-awaited testing results from the REALM Project and Battelle Labs (<https://www.webjunction.org/explore-topics/COVID-19-research-project.html>), people started standardizing on a three-day quarantine of returns. Then more testing of stacked material was done resulting in some people choosing to quarantine returns for four days. As of early September, we have learned that even five days isn't enough to quarantine delivery totes and some other plastic material.

Curbside pick-up was born in these early days of being allowed back in the buildings. If someone had mapped who was offering curbside pick-up, it would look like popcorn popping across the country. The number of libraries offering the service slowly increased and pretty soon nearly everyone was doing it.²

Many library directors will say that curbside pick-up is here to stay. People love the convenience too much to take the service away.

Rolling out curbside pick-up has had some challenges: how to safely make the handoff between library staff and library patrons; whether to accept returns; whether to charge fines; modifying

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circulation policies to fit the current needs; and selecting books for people that want them but who don't have the skills needed to negotiate the library catalog's requesting system.

Some libraries started putting together grab bags of materials selected by staff for specific patrons—kind of like homebound services on-the-fly.

Curbside helped get material in circulation again.

Importantly, also during this period, libraries started finding creative ways to get Wi-Fi hotspots out into communities. They began lending them if they weren't already. Those libraries already circulating hotspots increased their inventory. They took their bookmobiles into neighborhoods and created temporary hotspot connections around town. Many libraries made sure Wi-Fi from their building was available in their own parking lots.³

But one thing everyone has learned during this pandemic is that libraries alone cannot be the solution to the digital divide.

This isn't news to librarians who have been arguing that Internet access should be as readily available as electricity and water. Librarians understand that information cannot be free and accessible unless everyone has Internet access and knows how to use it. Public access computers, Wi-Fi hotspots, and media literacy are all staple services in our libraries today.⁴ However, these services are not enough to bridge a digital divide that only seems to be getting worse.

The coronavirus that closed libraries and schools has made it painfully clear that something much bigger has to happen to address the problem. As Gina Millsap stated in a recent Facebook post:

I think it's become obvious that the COVID-19 crisis is shining a spotlight on the flaws we have in our broadband infrastructure and on our failure to make the investments that should have been made for equitable access to what should be a basic utility, like water or electricity.⁵

According to BroadbandNow, the number of people who lack broadband Internet access could be as high as 42 million.⁶ The FCC reports that at least "18 million people lacked access to broadband Internet at the end of 2018."⁷ Even if all the libraries were open and circulating hundreds of Wi-Fi hotspots, we'd still have a very serious access problem.

THINKING DIFFERENTLY ABOUT ADDRESSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

In a paper published March 28, 2019, by the Urban Libraries Council (ULC), the author suggested three specific actions that libraries can take to address race and social equity and the digital divide. They are:

1. Assess and respond to the needs of your community through meaningful conversation (including considering different partners for your work)
2. Optimize funding opportunities to support your efforts (e.g. E-rate), and

3. Think outside the box to create effective solutions that are informed by those in need (e.g. lending Wi-Fi hot spots).⁸

While we know libraries have been heeding this advice when it comes to Wi-Fi hotspots, let's look into what can be done when we consider ULC's suggestion to consider different partners for your work.

Community Partners

An excellent example of what can be done with a coalition of community partners comes from Detroit where a mesh wireless network was put in place to provide permanent broadband in a low-income neighborhood.⁹ The project is called the Detroit Community Technology Project. With the community-based mesh network, only one Internet account is needed to provide access for multiple homes. The networks also enable people on the network to share resources on the network (calendar, files, bulletin board) and that data lives on their network, not in the cloud.

One of the sponsors of the Detroit Community Technology Project is the Allied Media Project (<https://www.alliedmedia.org/>) which also sponsors the CassCoWifi and the Equitable Internet Initiative to get broadband and digital literacy training into several underserved areas.

Community Networks (<https://muninetworks.org/>), a project of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance (<https://ilsr.org/>), describes several innovative projects in which communities partner with electric utilities. Surry County, Virginia, expects to extend broadband access to 6,700 households through a first-ever partnership between a utility (Dominion Energy Virginia) and an electric cooperative (Dominion Energy). A similar project is underway with the Northern Neck Cooperative and Dominion Energy.¹⁰ These initiatives are made possible due to some regulatory changes made in Virginia (SB 966).

According to Community Networks, there are 900 communities providing broadband connectivity locally (<https://muninetworks.org/communitymap>). But nineteen states still have barriers in place that discourage, if not outright prevent, local communities from investing in broadband.

Libraries in states where community networks are a viable option should be at the table, or perhaps setting the table, for discussions about how to bring broadband to the entire community - not just into the library or dispatched one-at-a-time via Wi-Fi hotspots. This is an opportunity to convene community conversations focusing on the issue of broadband. Library staff have been doing more and more of this type of outreach into the community and acting as facilitator. The ALA has even produced a Community Conversation Workbook (http://www.ala.org/tools/sites/ala.org/tools/files/content/LTC_ConvoGuide_final_062414.pdf) to support libraries just getting started.

State Partners

In California, the Governor recently issued Executive Order N-73-20 (<https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/8.14.20-EO-N-73-20.pdf>) directing state agencies to pursue a goal of 100 Mbps download speed and outlines actions across state agencies

and departments to accelerate mapping and data collection, funding, deployment, and adoption of high-speed internet.¹¹ This will undoubtedly create fertile ground for libraries to partner with other agencies and community organizations to advance this initiative. Libraries are specifically called out to raise awareness of low-cost broadband options to their local community.

Every state has some kind of broadband task force or commission or advisory council (<https://www.ncsl.org/research/telecommunications-and-information-technology/state-broadband-task-forces-commissions.aspx>). This is another instance where libraries should be at the table. In my state, our State Librarian is on the California Broadband Council. But many of these commissions do not have a representative from the library world which means they probably are not hearing from us. Whether it is through your local library, your state library, or your state library association, it is important for librarians to build relationships with people on these commissions—if not get a seat on the commission themselves.

National Partners

Unless your community is blanketed with affordable broadband connectivity, it will be important that we continue to advocate nationally for the needs we see. In addition to helping the patron standing right in front of us checking out their hotspot, we also need to address the needs of the people who aren't able to get to the library but are equally in need of access.

Our job is to make sure that any new initiatives undertaken by a new administration provide for free and equitable access to the Internet for every household. Extending E-rate (the Federal Communication Commission's program for making Internet access more affordable for schools and libraries) isn't enough. Free (or at least affordable) broadband needs to be brought to every home.

The Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) argues that fiber-to-the-home is the best option for consumers today because it will be easily upgradeable without touching the underlying cables and will support the next generation of applications (see <https://www.eff.org/wp/case-fiber-home-today-why-fiber-superior-medium-21st-century-broadband>). Libraries have worked with the EFF on issues related to privacy and government transparency. Maybe it's time to team-up with them about broadband.

Global Partners

Low Earth Orbit (LEO) satellites could potentially bring broadband to everyone on Earth.¹² Starlink (<https://www.starlink.com/>) is Elon Musk's initiative and Project Kuiper (<https://blog.aboutamazon.com/company-news/amazon-receives-fcc-approval-for-project-kuiper-satellite-constellation>) is Amazon's Jeff Bezos' project. A private beta Starlink service is due (or perhaps it is already happening). If it works as Musk has envisioned, it could be a game-changer. Or it might just make the digital divide worse if it isn't affordable to everyone who needs it. How might we lobby Musk to roll-out this service in a way that is equitable and fair?

SPEAK UP, SPEAK OUT, AND GET IN THE WAY

These are just a few avenues that we, as professionals committed to free access to information, might pursue. I worry that we have not made enough noise about the problems we see in our communities that are a result of broadband inequity and digital poverty. And although virtually every library is doing something to address the problem, our efforts are no match for the magnitude of the problem.

In a blog post on the Brookings Institution's website, authors Lara Fishbane and Adie Tomer argue for a new agenda focused on comprehensive digital equity that includes (among other things) "building networks of local champions, ensuring community advocates, government officials, and private network providers share intelligence, debate priorities, and deploy new programming."¹³ There are no better local champions and advocates for communities than the City or County Librarians and their staffs. Let's treat this problem with the seriousness it deserves and at a scale that will be meaningful.

To quote John Lewis (as so many of us have since his death on July 17, 2020), it's time for us to "speak up, speak out, and get in the way."¹⁴ We have to make it painfully clear to policymakers that libraries cannot bridge the digital divide with public access computers and hotspots.

We need to tell our communities' stories, convene conversations, and agitate for equitable broadband that is as readily available as water and electricity.

ENDNOTES

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