

Closing the Digital Divide in Rural Public Libraries

Kelly Rausch

San Jose State University – School of Library and Information Sciences

Dr. Ruphina Ozoh

INFO 204

September 12, 2022

Today's public library, whether big or small, is no longer an institution that simply delivers basic literacy instruction or information gatekeeping. It has evolved into a community pillar that serves its users in ways unimaginable before the advent of recent technologies. The library of today, is committed to fostering creativity and innovation, encouraging civic engagement, instructing critical skills for employment, supporting social infrastructure, safe harboring a community in crisis, and at the core of its modern foundation, it is responsible for closing the digital divide through technological access and digital and information literacy programs (Freundenberger, 2022). Unfortunately, rural libraries- servicing those who suffer greatly from the digital divide- are not delivering impactful digital programming due to historically less funding and less access to qualified staff, compared to their suburban and city counterparts.

In rural communities, where the cost of connection is prohibitive to companies that provide access to the internet and disproportionately affects low-income people who cannot afford expensive rates for internet and computers (Freundenberger, 2022), the library is often the only place in rural areas addressing these needs. This is important because access to the internet, technology, and digital skills, at its very basics, can help with unemployment, accessing social services, ensuring children learn remotely or even allowing seniors to attend crucial tele-health appointments (Freundenberger, 2022). And beyond the basics, access to technology can create jobs skills, encourage local entrepreneurship, develop creative skills and most importantly, at a time when disinformation is rampant, it can be a tool to create insight into information literacy.

A library that offers free internet is meeting the basic requirements of closing the digital divide. Equity in technological access is important but even more so is developing capabilities and expertise with technologies. This is an essential part of closing the digital divide and it is usually fulfilled through the knowledge, instruction, and one-on-one counseling of the library staff. Unfortunately, rural libraries are often staffed with paraprofessionals who lack the knowledge or confidence to share this information. On average rural libraries have less than one (.75) librarian with a master's degree from an ALA accredited institution (Real, Bertot, & Jaeger, 2015) with a median of 1.9 full-time equivalent employees (ALA, 2020) and an average of 4.0 staff members, including part-time employees. They have an average of 41,425 visits annually and are open 40 hours a week inside an average 2500 square foot branch (Real, Bertot, & Jaeger, 2015). Though these libraries boast a dedicated and enthusiastic staff there is little time, skills and resources to internally address digital training or to create digital literacy programs.

To make matters worse, rural libraries are funded mostly through local monies and have the unique problem of being underfunded due to the large swathes of agricultural land (usually privy to property tax breaks) generating less in property tax and sales tax revenue due to population size. And public library funding structures that place local governments at the forefront of budgeting plans put rural libraries in a serious disadvantage and promote a digital divide between rural and nonrural areas (Real, Bertot, & Jaeger, 2015). At a time when information literacy, digital literacy, and technological skills are no longer supplemental competencies but necessary ones, the health of citizens and our society depends on access to them. Addressing staffing and digital inclusion issues should be a rural library's priority. If it is

addressed properly, not only does it deeply benefit library users, it will also have an outstanding impact on the value and the future of the library.

So how does a rural librarian address the digital divide, despite staff's skill deficiency and funding? It would have to be a multi-tiered approach internally and externally. Internally, it should begin with a sense of urgency that is geared towards fostering learning and creating change (Popp, 2012). This could be established by creating a certificate program for staff that can be completed independently through paid online and free online coursework provided by the American Library Association. This would begin to give staff knowledge and confidence to further their own skills and address users' digital needs.

Externally, a librarian could use the recommendations from Moreland and Krammer, by approaching school libraries for a collaborative partnership. It is shown that partnership between both institutions gain improved services, shared funding, and create opportunities for co-teaching and collaborative programming (2020). For instance, it is often required for high school seniors to complete community service during their final school year. If there were students proficient in digital knowledge, creating volunteer programs that would allow them to teach digital literacy to the community or create tech support programs for seniors could be beneficial for both parties. Their technological knowledge (including social media), tutoring and support shared with library staff would be just as instrumental. There may also be a similar shared benefit and interest with county foster care. And finally, there may be a gainful partnership with the large businesses of the rural town- grocery stores, internet providers, energy services, agricultural etc.- they may all see the gain of helping the library with a technological reboot, including the acquisition of

innovative technology related to design, production, makerspaces, and, most obviously, job training and skills.

It may seem like a long road to close the digital divide in rural libraries but with the help of urgency, teamwork and the partnership with outside institutions, the limitations of the rural library begin to dissolve and the enthusiasm and hope of its employees propel it forward. Now is the time to close this gap, for the health of our society and the greater good of our nation.

References

- American Library Association. (2019, June 7). *DigitalLead: rural libraries creating new possibilities*, Public Library Association. <http://www.ala.org/pla/initiatives/digitallead>
- Freudenberger, E. (2022). Community anchors for lifelong learners; public libraries. In S. Hirsh (Ed), *Information services today* (3rd ed., pp.113-126), Rowan & Littlefield
- Moreland, D. & Kammer, J. (2020). School and public library collaboration: opportunities for sharing and community connections, *Knowledge Quest*, 49(1), 40-44.
- Popp. (2012). Changing world, changing libraries: new literacies, new user needs, and leadership for change. *Reference and User Services Quarterly*, 52(2), 84–89.
- Real, B., Bertot, J.C., & Jaeger, P.T. (2014). Rural public libraries and digital inclusion: issues and challenges. *Information Technology and Libraries*, 33(1), 6-20.
<https://doi.org/10.6017/ital.v33i1.5141>