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(the following excerpts are adapted from materials by Nancy Kranich, President, and Sandra Shirley, Telecommunications Specialist, both at ALA.)

Libraries: Ensuring Information Equity in the Digital Age

Adapted from an article by Nancy Kranich, President of the American Library Association (previously published in *American Libraries*, January 2001)

The true dawn of the Information Age was in the 1930s when Congress passed the Communications Act of 1934, calling for universal service to ensure equitable access to communications technologies. Libraries were busier than ever; many were open seven days a week, including holidays. We are now seeing the dawn of a digital age. And, just as they did in the 1930s, libraries still need to provide equal opportunity to all Americans. Librarians have a unique role in leveling the playing field and bridging the widening gap between the information haves and have-nots.

Libraries are more essential than ever. They are essential to our economic well-being, to the advancement of learning, to coping with information overload, and to closing the digital divide. With the development of the Internet, there is new hope for rekindling the democratic principles put forth by our founding fathers in the Constitution—new hope that everyone will have the opportunity to participate in our information society. Even if a household cannot afford or chooses not to connect to the Internet from home, people can log on at their local library. Thanks to the universal service provisions of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, nearly every community is now connected, thus ensuring everyone an on-ramp to the information superhighway.

ALA priority action area:

Nevertheless, the latest research indicates that many low-income, minority, disabled, rural, and inner-city groups are falling behind in their ownership of computers and access divide” between rich and poor, between black and white, between urban and rural, between English- and Spanish-speaking, between old and young, between immigrants and Native Americans, we can be certain that there is and promises to remain differential access to the Internet. Libraries play a special role, not just in providing access, but also in ensuring that the public can find content of interest and apply the skills necessary to utilize information successfully.

Access to an abundance of information does not necessarily mean access to a diversity of sources. Cyberspace is sparse when it comes to local information, particularly for rural residents and those living below the poverty level. Internet sites are designed for people

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with average or advanced literacy levels. Content about the uniqueness of the cultures of ethnic and racial minorities is hard to find. Many Americans want practical information about their communities written at a basic-literacy level that includes content for non-English speakers and racial and ethnic cultural information. They depend on the information; they seek information that helps them with their day-to-day problems and enables them to participate as members of their democratic community.

The electronic age has become a major challenge for the 60% of the workforce that engages in some information-related activity. Librarians are needed more than ever to ensure that the public has the information literacy skills it needs to live, work, learn, and govern in the digital age. Libraries offer not only access to computers and networks, but also the content, training, and expertise crucial to ensure widespread participation in our information society. ...

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LIBRARIES AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE – Highlights About Libraries Roles in Resolving the Digital Divide

Based upon a presentation by Saundra L. Shirley, American Library Association, Office for Information Technology Policy (2000)

Libraries are Central to Digital Divide Solutions

How many public libraries are there and who uses them?

- There are more than 122,000 library facilities.
- Public libraries provide public access to the Internet more than any other source after schools and work.
- 65% of all households use public library services each year.
- 100% of all people living in the U.S. can use public libraries regardless of abilities, income...

What is the Digital Divide?

It is a term that reflects the differences in access to information, the Internet and other technologies...including differences based on race, gender, geography, economic status, and in the skills, knowledge, and abilities to use information.

Impacts of Digital Divide are on:

- People, Institutions, Businesses
- Medicine, Health Care, Education
- Economies (local, state, national, international/global)
- Content and Digitization (racial/cultural)

Democratic Participation

Why Does the Digital Divide Matter?

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The Growth of the Information-based Economy

- Currently one-third of the economy.
- By 2005, projected to become a multi-trillion dollars a year industry.
- The largest sector for growth in jobs.
- Demands for skilled personnel out number qualified job seekers, by more than 300,000 according to latest estimates.

How Did We Get Here?:The Education/Information Haves and Have Nots

- Public libraries and schools were built to bridge the education and information divide.
- Equality of access to information matters in a democracy.
- Ability to compete/function in society.

From the Information Haves and Have Nots ... to the Digital Divide

- Exponential growth of Internet use, electronic resources, and other technologies.
 - Growing centrality of e-commerce.
 - Maximization of technology integration into business and services.
 - Global economies and competition.
 - Disconnect between education/workforce preparation and technology demands.
 - Lack of skills, knowledge, and abilities of educated and uneducated.
 - Lack of access/deployment.

Today's Situation: Broadband and Advanced Services Issues/Wait and See

- Convergence in technologies and industries.
- Faster speeds and greater capacity.
- Deployment -- inner-city, remote, and rural areas.
- Diversity of Content and Nondiscrimination.
- Public interest and public access.
- Intellectual property and copyright/user rights.

Options for Addressing the Digital Divide

- Computer/technology access in every home.
- Computer literacy and skills training from preschool through college.
- Libraries are central to digital divide solutions.
- Collaborative and cooperative partnerships.

How Libraries Bridge the Digital Divide

- Libraries have provided information access and services in the U.S. for more than 100 years.
 - Most libraries have the technical infrastructure, electronic resources already and are existing facilities:
 - -16,047 public library outlets
 - -98,169 public and private school media centers

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- -3,408 academic libraries.
- More than 90% of public library outlets offer public access to the Internet and other electronic resources.
- Libraries have professional and trained staff.

Services Libraries Provide To Bridge the Information and Digital Divide

- Training and classes on using computers (including job training) and on using and searching the Internet
 - Job, career, and college preparation
 - Reading, writing, literacy, and life skills programs
 - Cultural, community development, after-school, homework assistance, mentoring and tutoring programs
 - Health, mental health, and social welfare information and referral
 - Government, business, tax, and local history information
 - Circulating and reference collections, and more....

Libraries Partner to Bridge the Digital Divide With:

- Schools, Colleges and Universities
- Local, State, and Federal Governments
- Business Groups and Corporations
- Health/Mental Health Organizations
- Human/Social Service Organizations
- Girls/Boys Clubs, YMCAs, YWCAs, and Recreation Centers
- Faith-based Organizations and Public Housing
- Research Centers and Historical Organizations
- Other Libraries (local, regional, state, national)
- Museums, Arts, Literary, and Science Centers

Recommendations to Address the Digital Divide:

- Support libraries as central to digital divide solutions.
- Include libraries as key collaborative/ cooperative partners in all digital divide remedies.
 - Minimize duplication and maximize use of existing library facilities, and professional and trained library staff in the expansion of access and creation of needed services.
 - Define and pursue 21st century computer/information literacy.
 - Ensure deployment of and access to broadband in underserved communities.