



USING LIBRARIANSHIP PRACTICES TO SUPPORT DIGITAL EQUITY AND CURB DIGITAL DIVIDE IN UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

This study examines the pivotal role of librarianship practices (provision of digital resources, digital literacy programs, and community outreach efforts among others) in promoting digital equity and addressing the digital divide in underserved communities. As digital technologies become increasingly essential for participation in education, employment, and society, disparities in access to these technologies exacerbate existing social inequalities. Libraries, as community hubs, are uniquely positioned to bridge this gap by providing free access to digital resources, offering comprehensive digital literacy programs, and engaging in proactive community outreach. This research highlights the importance of expanding access to technology and internet services within libraries, tailoring digital literacy initiatives to meet diverse community needs, and advocating for digital inclusion at the policy level. Additionally, it underscores the necessity of forming strategic partnerships with educational institutions, non-profits, and government agencies to enhance the reach and impact of digital equity efforts. The findings suggest that libraries play an indispensable role in empowering underserved populations by equipping them with the tools and knowledge required to thrive in the digital age. By implementing targeted librarianship practices, libraries can effectively reduce the digital divide, ensuring that all community members have equal opportunities to benefit from the advancements of the digital era. This study contributes to the broader discourse on digital equity and offers practical recommendations for libraries seeking to support inclusive access to technology in their communities.

Keywords: digital divide, digital equity, librarianship practices, underserved communities

Introduction

Libraries, as long-standing pillars of community support and knowledge dissemination, are uniquely positioned to address the digital divide through targeted librarianship practices. By offering free access to computers, the internet, and digital resources, libraries provide essential services to those who might otherwise be excluded from the digital world. Moreover, librarians are equipped to offer digital literacy training, helping

individuals develop the skills needed to navigate and utilize digital technologies effectively. Through community outreach and tailored programs, libraries can reach underserved populations, empowering them with the tools and knowledge necessary to participate in the digital economy and society. In underserved communities, libraries often serve as one of the few, if not the only, access points to technology and the Internet. Librarianship practices, which include the provision of



free access to digital resources, digital literacy training, and community outreach, can play a pivotal role in bridging the digital divide. By leveraging their role as community hubs, libraries can help ensure that all individuals, regardless of socioeconomic status, have the opportunity to develop the skills and access the resources necessary to thrive in a digital world (Caron & Markusen, 2016).

The digital divide remains a significant challenge in underserved communities, where access to technology and digital literacy are often limited. This gap in access not only affects individuals' ability to participate in the digital economy but also hinders their opportunities for education, employment, and social engagement. Digital equity ensuring that all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in society is crucial in addressing this divide. Libraries have long been centres for knowledge and community support, and they are uniquely positioned to address digital equity through targeted librarianship practices. The digital divide, characterized by unequal access to technology and the internet, is a persistent issue that exacerbates social inequalities, particularly in underserved communities. In these areas, limited access to digital tools and inadequate digital literacy hinders individuals' ability to participate fully in education, employment, and civic engagement. As society becomes increasingly reliant on digital technologies, the gap between those who have access to these resources and those who do not continues to widen, leaving many individuals at a disadvantage. Addressing this divide is crucial for ensuring that all members of society can benefit from the opportunities provided by the digital age (Rozak & Purike, 2024).

Librarianship practices play a crucial role in promoting digital equity and addressing the digital divide in underserved

communities. Digital equity refers to the fair and equal access to digital tools, resources, and skills that enable individuals to fully participate in society. In contrast, the digital divide represents the gap between those who have access to these digital resources and those who do not, often due to socioeconomic factors, geographic location, or limited infrastructure. Libraries, through their core practices, serve as vital intermediaries in bridging this gap by providing free access to technology, internet services, and digital resources, thus directly contributing to digital equity. Moreover, librarianship practices extend beyond mere access to technology; they also encompass digital literacy training, community outreach, and personalized support, which are essential in empowering individuals to effectively use digital tools. By offering these services, libraries help individuals in underserved communities overcome barriers to technology use, thereby reducing the digital divide. The relationship between librarianship practices, digital equity, and the digital divide is therefore intertwined, as effective librarianship practices can significantly enhance digital equity by ensuring that all members of a community have the resources and skills necessary to engage in the digital world, ultimately narrowing the digital divide (Caron & Markusen, 2016; Rozak & Purike, 2024).

Librarianship Practices that support Digital Equity and curb Digital Divide in Underserved Communities

Librarianship plays a crucial role in promoting digital equity and addressing the digital divide, particularly in underserved communities. Below are some of the practices that libraries can use to support Digital Equity and curb the Digital Divide in Underserved Communities as identified by Frank *et al.*, (2021):



1. Providing Free Access to Technology and the Internet

Libraries offer public access to computers, the internet, and other digital tools, which is critical for individuals in underserved communities who may lack these resources at home. This access enables community members to engage in online education, job searches, and other essential activities that require Internet connectivity.

Public Computers and Wi-Fi: Libraries offer free access to computers and high-speed internet, which is essential for individuals who do not have these resources at home. During the pandemic, many libraries expanded their services by providing amplified Wi-Fi and hotspot lending programs to extend internet access beyond library walls.

Device Lending Programs: Libraries are increasingly lending devices such as laptops, tablets, and e-readers, ensuring that community members have the necessary tools to access digital resources and complete online tasks.

2. Digital Literacy Programs and Training

Libraries often provide training sessions and workshops on digital literacy, teaching individuals how to use computers, navigate the internet, manage online resources, and understand digital security. These programs empower community members with the skills needed to participate fully in the digital world.

Workshops and Classes: Libraries can host training sessions that teach essential digital skills, such as using software applications, navigating the internet, and understanding online safety. These programs are vital for empowering community members to utilize technology effectively.

Tailored Support for Vulnerable Populations: Libraries can develop specific programs aimed at vulnerable groups, including seniors, low-income

families, and individuals with disabilities, to address their unique digital literacy needs.

3. Collaborations and Community Partnerships:

Libraries often collaborate with local organizations, schools, and government agencies to expand their reach and resources. These partnerships can provide additional support for digital inclusion efforts, such as funding for technology upgrades or joint digital literacy initiatives.

Collaborative Initiatives: Libraries can partner with local organizations, schools, and government agencies to create community-based digital equity coalitions. These partnerships can help identify specific needs and develop targeted strategies to improve digital access and literacy.

Leveraging Existing Networks: By utilizing their established relationships within the community, libraries can effectively advocate for digital equity and collaborate on initiatives that provide broader access to technology and training.

4. Inclusive Programming

Culturally Relevant Resources: Libraries should curate collections that reflect the diverse backgrounds of their communities, ensuring that materials are accessible and relevant to all users. This includes providing resources in multiple languages and formats.

Engagement through Events: Hosting community events that focus on technology, such as hackathons or maker fairs, can foster interest and participation in digital learning while building a sense of community among participants.

5. Advocacy and Policy Engagement

Librarians advocate for policies and initiatives that promote digital equity at the local, state, and national levels. By



participating in policy discussions and advocating for greater access to digital resources, libraries help shape the broader environment in which digital equity efforts take place.

Promoting Digital Equity Policies: Librarians can engage in advocacy efforts to influence local and national policies that promote digital equity. This includes supporting initiatives that expand broadband access and funding for digital literacy programs.

Research and Data Collection: Libraries can research to better understand the digital needs of their communities, using this data to inform programming and advocacy efforts. For instance, studies on the digital problem-solving processes of vulnerable adults can help tailor services to meet specific needs.

6. Outreach and Community Engagement

Librarians engage in outreach to ensure that underserved populations are aware of the resources and programs available to them. By reaching out to schools, community centres, and other local organizations, libraries can connect with those who may not otherwise use library services.

7. Tailored Programs and Services

Libraries can develop programs tailored to the specific needs of their communities, such as language-specific digital resources for non-English speakers or assistive technologies for individuals with disabilities. These customized services ensure that all community members can benefit from digital resources.

Procedures that Librarianship Practices support Digital Equity and curb Digital Divide in Underserved Communities

Librarianship practices aimed at supporting digital equity and addressing the digital divide in underserved

communities involve several key procedures. Below are some of the procedures as identified by Ogunmodede *et al.*, (2023):

1. Needs Assessment

Conducting a thorough needs assessment is the first crucial step in understanding the specific digital needs and challenges faced by underserved communities. This process involves gathering data through surveys, focus groups, and community outreach to identify barriers to digital access and literacy. The findings from the needs assessment help libraries tailor their services and resources to address the most pressing issues.

2. Resource Allocation

Based on the insights gained from the needs assessment, libraries can allocate resources to support digital equity initiatives. This may include dedicating funding for technology infrastructure, such as public computers, Wi-Fi hotspots, and device lending programs. Libraries can also allocate resources for digital literacy training, including hiring staff with expertise in technology education and developing curricula tailored to the needs of the community.

3. Partnerships and Collaborations

Establishing partnerships and collaborations with local organizations, schools, and government agencies is crucial for leveraging resources and expertise to address the digital divide. Libraries can work with partners to develop joint initiatives, share resources, and create a more comprehensive approach to digital equity. These partnerships can also help libraries reach a wider audience and ensure that their services are accessible to those who need them most.

4. Community Outreach and Engagement

Engaging with the community is essential for building trust, understanding their needs, and ensuring that digital equity initiatives are effective. Libraries can



engage with the community through outreach events, focus groups, and advisory boards. This ongoing dialogue helps libraries stay informed about the evolving needs of the community and adjust their services accordingly.

5. Training and Professional Development

Providing training and professional development opportunities for library staff is crucial for ensuring that they have the knowledge and skills necessary to support digital equity initiatives. This may include training on digital literacy instruction, technology troubleshooting, and community engagement strategies. By investing in staff development, libraries can create a culture of innovation and ensure that they are well-equipped to address the digital divide.

6. Evaluation and Continuous Improvement

Regularly evaluating the effectiveness of digital equity initiatives and continuously improving them is essential for ensuring long-term success. Libraries can use data collected through needs assessments, community engagement, and program evaluations to identify areas for improvement and make data-driven decisions about resource allocation and program development. This process of continuous improvement helps libraries stay responsive to the changing needs of the community and ensures that their efforts have a lasting impact.

Conclusion

In conclusion, libraries are vital in promoting digital equity and addressing the digital divide in underserved communities, through the provisions of access to technology, offering digital literacy training, fostering community partnerships, implementing inclusive programming, and engaging in advocacy, librarians can create a more equitable digital landscape for all. Several librarianship practices are instrumental in supporting digital equity and curbing the digital divide in underserved communities:

These practices collectively help bridge the digital divide, ensuring that all community members have the opportunity to access, use, and benefit from digital resources and technologies. Through these practices, libraries act as vital community hubs that empower individuals with the tools, knowledge, and opportunities needed to achieve digital equity, thereby curbing the digital divide in underserved communities. Ultimately, the role of libraries in curbing the digital divide goes beyond simply providing access to technology; it involves fostering an inclusive environment where all community members have the opportunity to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to thrive in a digital world. As society continues to evolve with rapid technological advancements, libraries will remain vital in ensuring that no one is left behind, making them indispensable in the fight for digital equity in underserved communities.

Suggestions/Way Forwards

The following suggestions were provided for using librarianship practices to support digital equity and curb the digital divide in underserved communities:

1. Libraries should continually upgrade their technological infrastructure to provide reliable, high-speed Internet access and a sufficient number of computers and digital devices. This includes exploring partnerships with local governments or private organizations to secure funding for these upgrades.
2. Libraries should implement a wide range of digital literacy programs tailored to different skill levels, from basic computer usage to more advanced topics like digital content creation and cybersecurity. These programs should be designed to meet the specific needs of the local community, including offering



multilingual support where necessary.

3. Libraries must proactively engage with underserved populations to raise awareness of the digital resources and programs available. This can be achieved through partnerships with local schools, community centers, and social service organizations, as well as by offering mobile library services to reach remote or hard-to-access areas.
4. Libraries should actively participate in local, state, and national policy discussions to advocate for increased funding and support for digital inclusion initiatives. By influencing policy, libraries can help ensure that digital equity remains a priority in public planning and funding decisions.
5. Libraries should seek to form strategic partnerships with educational institutions, non-profit organizations, technology companies, and government agencies to amplify their efforts in bridging the digital divide. These collaborations can provide additional resources, expertise, and reach, enhancing the overall impact of digital equity initiatives in underserved communities.

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