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# Random Ramblings: The Digital Divide

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# Random Ramblings — The Digital Divide

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**Michael Stephens**, an Assistant Professor at the **Graduate School of Library and Information Science, Dominican University**, gave the first plenary session on Saturday morning during the 2009 **Charleston Conference**. In his talk, "Hyperlinked Library Services: Trends, Tools, and Transparency," he painted a glowing picture of what technology could do to improve library services. To quote the description in the conference program:

The **Hyperlinked Library** is an open, participatory institution that welcomes user input and creativity. It is built on human connections and conversations.... Librarians are tapped in to user spaces and places online to interact, have presence, and point the way.... This presentation provides a roadmap toward becoming the **Hyperlinked Library**: transparent, participatory, playful, user-centered and human....

His accompanying slides showed a wonderful world of interconnectivity with **Kindles**, smart phones, **Facebook**, **Twitter**, and other new marvels. The library connects with patrons, and patrons connect to the library in a new technologically enhanced way. What a wonderful way to enhance library services!

As I sat in the audience applauding this vision of a new era in library service, a sudden doubt entered my mind. I live in Michigan where the unemployment rate hovers around 15%, where families are losing their homes, and where people wonder where they'll get their next meal. Will these users be able to enjoy hyperlinked library service? Do they have the needed computers, smart phones, and broadband Internet connections? To answer the last question, "currently, more than **500,000 households** in the state of Michigan do not have access to broadband" according to the **[Michigan] State Broadband Planning Commission**. **Michael's** second slide says that "library resources are for all." How do these users whose only fault is having the bad luck of losing their jobs or of being born into poverty fit into this vision? Are they somehow excluded from the "all?" Do libraries assume that they don't exist since they can't call the library on their cell phones or log in on their high speed Internet connections? After the talk, I went to the microphone and asked this question. I admire greatly **Michael Stephens** for not brushing aside my concerns and for talking to me at length during the next break. We didn't come up with any easy solutions, but at least the question was raised. (As an aside, **Michael's 77 MB PowerPoint** presentation from the **Charleston Conference** took ten minutes to download on my medium fast Internet connection and would have been practically inaccessible with dial up.)

Today's students at all levels are severely handicapped without a decent computer and broadband access at home. One obvious dis-

advantage is that they can't take online courses though they often need them the most if they live in rural areas without a decent college. These are the areas, however, where Internet access is pricey and slow. Even traditional students most likely will be expected to use classroom management software like **Blackboard** or **WebCT** to get their assignments, submit them, collaborate with group members, and other tasks. Just last Thursday during winter orientation for my school, the blunt answer to a student who asked if he could get by with dial in access was "no."

Students who live on or commute regularly to campus can use its computer labs. I met with **Nancy Beals**, the electronic resources librarian at **Wayne State University**, to get a clearer picture of what students could do or not do in these labs. The good news here is that students can download journal articles to their flash drives if they have a computer at home, even without an Internet connection. The bad news is that eBooks, in our system at least, are available only online. I would suggest that libraries take this fact into account as they switch over to digital monographs. I would further suggest that academic libraries buy heavily used books in both formats, but I doubt that many will due to declining budgets.

Even in the best of cases, being forced to use a computer lab at school is like having one hand tied behind your back. While wealthier peers work from home, the poorer students without adequate technology must use the library's computers, find computer access elsewhere on campus, or head for the public library. Compare a student with home computer access rolling out of bed at 7:00 am to find the last few online resources to complete a paper due at 2:30 pm with the technologically bereft student having to come to campus to do the same. For poorer commuting students, extra trips to access digital resources can mean taking the bus, bumming a ride, and spending precious funds on gasoline and parking.

If readers think that the vast majority of households have Internet access, think again. The July 2008 *Pew Internet & American Life* reported that "55% of adult Americans have broadband Internet connections at home, up from 47% who had high-speed access at home last year at this time." Even if access has increased since last year and even if students are more likely to have access than non-students, these figures suggest that a significant number of college students can't use their online library resources from home. Since the conference, I've been asking librarian guest speakers in my academic libraries course about students without home computers. Their response has been unanimous: they encounter many students for whom campus access is the only alternative.

Beyond the campus, the public library used to be the great equalizer. A poor kid whose parents couldn't afford to buy books

could check them out from the local library, take them home, read them, and then go back for more. A voracious reader could at least partially overcome the disadvantage of less than adequate schools and gain the knowledge and skills needed to get into a good college or land a good job. Large public libraries might even provide more convenient resources for college students, at least for undergraduates. While books remain for reading in the public library, access to scholarly online resources beyond those suitable for high school is less likely. Furthermore, some public libraries allow access only to information resources and don't make available the software such as word processing and spreadsheets needed to complete assignments. Finally, according to *Public Libraries and the Internet 2009: Study Results and Findings*, around 18% don't allow users to connect flash drives to public library computers so the students can't store their work or information findings for later use.

A digital divide that hinders getting educated is especially troublesome in these difficult economic times when employers require more skills and higher degrees. Detroit, where I live, used to be a place where a high school graduate could get a job that supported a middle class lifestyle. Manufacturing jobs moved abroad, and the remaining ones pay much less than they used to. My university's enrollment is reasonably steady even in these tough times because area residents are getting more education in hopes of bettering their lives. While upward mobility in America has often been more of a myth than a reality, America nonetheless needs a better educated work force to complete in the global economy. Hindering intelligent, talented students whose only fault is being poor from accessing library resources to complete the assignments that will lead to academic success, needed skills, and required degrees seems to me a violation of the American social contract, if not an outright denial of the American dream.

This article has come a long way from the optimistic view of the digital future painted by **Michael Stephens** to a gloomy prediction of a permanent underclass from the lack of computer access and skills. **Michael** and I didn't come up with an answer in Charleston. I still don't have one now. I would suggest that all libraries, but especially academic libraries, think about those students without computers and perhaps more importantly without broadband Internet access as they implement new services that move away from print to digital. I do have a few suggestions. Buy the extra copy of an important book in print even if the library already has a digital copy. Make sure that students can download to their flash drives even if doing so increases security risks. Have enough fast computers somewhere on campus for all who need to use them. Maximize the li-

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brary Website for speedy loading and subscribe to electronic resources that do the same in the hopes that some students might get by with a dial up connection. I'm sure that others could come up with additional suggestions. I agree that digital is the future of academic libraries, but libraries could at least recognize that the change has a downside for some users.

I'll close by confessing why this issue is so important to me. I grew up in a lower middle class family where money was tight. Through hard work, scholarships, and the help of public and academic libraries, I received a doctorate from **Yale University** and a masters in library science from **Columbia University**. I'd like hard working, intelligent students who are unlucky enough to be poor to have the same opportunities. To do so, they need to find a way to cross the digital divide. We should take it upon ourselves as individuals and as a profession to help them make it. 🍀