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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 services? 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 talking to me at length during the next break. He didn’t come up with any easy solutions, but talking to me at length during the next break. While I live 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 workforce 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-
Library 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. 🌟