Summer 2000

Bridging The Digital Divide

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FROM THE PRESIDENT OF RUSA

Bridging the Digital Divide

RUSA has recently reaffirmed the division's commitment to advocate the information disenfranchised in its new mission and goals. While technology has infinite potential as a tool to address the needs of the information disenfranchised, it often has the opposite effect of enlarging the gap between those with access to information and those without. This gap has become known as the "digital divide."

There is some debate about the exact nature of the digital divide. It generally is thought to exist along socioeconomic and racial lines, but the data is changing so quickly it is difficult to pin down the current state of the divide. While a 1999 National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) report cited a growing divide between the richest and poorest among us, the researchers were only looking at in-home use. Today 57 percent of U.S. households do not have computers, and while penetration of technology in middle class households has jumped an astounding 15 percent (up to 62 percent) in the past year, the growth in lower income households is negligible. However, the gap shrinks when one looks at data on those who have access. The most recent data from Forrester Research in Cambridge, Mass. does show a narrowing gap— 45 percent of whites are online versus 35 percent of African-Americans

(a 50 percent increase from the previous year). Furthermore, a 1999 report from the Pew Research Center for People and the Press cited that 62 percent of workers go online through their jobs. Yet while that same report found 75 percent of students go online through their schools, there persists a disparity between educational institutions. The most recent annual UCLA survey of college freshmen found that while 90 percent of students at private universities reported using the Internet for schoolwork, only 77.6 percent at black public colleges reported such use. The study links this disparity to access in the public schools and there is strong evidence that schools in poorer urban and rural districts have not only less hardware, but less ability to train students.

Addressing the digital divide is not simply a matter of running wire and providing public computers—it is also a matter of ensuring that people have the requisite skills to use the technology and that they see relevance of the technology to their lives. This gap is not limited to socioeconomic or racial differences, but includes gender and age differences, as well. What is clear is that the digital divide must be bridged on various fronts and that

the libraries in our schools, colleges, and communities are in a position to make major inroads in addressing disparity of opportunity and education, as well as access.

There have been many projects throughout the country to bring technological and information literacy to disadvantaged populations. Perhaps one of the best known is the InfoPeople project in California, which, within five years, connected 46 percent of the public libraries in California to the Internet and provided training to staff to take advantage of networked resources and services. In Chuck McClure's evaluation report on the project he wrote: "Without this project the Internet would not be as widely or as effectively used in California public libraries as it is today. The InfoPeople project revitalized the image the public has of libraries . . ."

Reference and user services staff can work to decrease the disparity between the information "haves" and "have-nots" by developing new services and programs. We have the skills to create relevant content, to teach the intricacies of searching and evaluating information, and to provide an understanding haven for those intimidated by the technology. ∎

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