Toward Social Justice and Right of Access Information in Rural Libraries

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Abstract
This paper reviews the concept of social justice in information services for disadvantaged populations. Disadvantaged populations include residents with lower social economic status as well as people who are excluded today’s digital society - those who shy away from using digital and handheld devices. Cases related to information literacy training in rural areas were discussed. The paper attempted to provide a solution of bridging the digital divide using the frame work of digital inclusion and digital literacy training. Social justice is a practical tool to promote right of access information to all users in digital society.

Keywords: community informatics; information services; information policy; library science


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1 Introduction
Information is one of the basic resources in social life. Organizations and individuals need information for growth and development. While the Internet brought convenience to information access, it also resulted in inequality for people who don’t have literacy skills or technical resources. The issue of inequity and digital divide is especially true in rural libraries, where funding support is limited and a library’s social value is considered less important by various populations in their communities.

1.1 Imbalance of Funding Support
In the U.S., rural librarians are active in local, regional, or even state-level professional conferences and networks, but they receive limited funding from federal and state governments, while mainly receive support from local government and private donations. Globally, it is not uncommon to see countries built rural libraries from central government funding support. For example, China has successfully built thousands of “3-Rural Reading Rooms” and networked digital resources that directly support agricultural, rural area, and farmers. Regardless, rural libraries in many countries face challenges in continuous funding, resources, community building, and personnel training.

1.2 Conceptual Misunderstanding
Part of the reason of lack of funding support for libraries lies within the promotion of the educational value of libraries. Many public librarians may not see themselves as educators (Immoreth & Ash-Geisler, 1995). Yet, regardless of the settings they decide to work in, librarians typically have the same core value of user services. All librarians should offer educational services, be champions for intellectual freedom, provide access to technology and information resources. In general, libraries should serve as havens of informal learning and are environments that foster the development of literacy skills.

2 Social Justice in Information Services
Libraries have been providing services equally to everybody in the community, but the concept of social justice has not been discussed until recently. Rioux (2010) reviewed the concept of social justice and found that its main concern is how people are treated fairly and have a fair share in that society’s benefits. Social
scientists John Rawls (2001) from Harvard University believes social justice is to protect “equal access to basic rights and liberties, rights, and fair opportunities” of all citizens, as well as to address “the least advantaged” members of society.” (Rawls, 2001, p. 59). Fan (2011) reviewed the theory of library equity with the emphasis of social equity in his book, Equitable Access to Library Resources He suggested the principal of social justice can be used as a practical tool for Chinese Country Librarians. Using the typology of multiple qualifiers of social justice, Mehra, Albright, and & Rioux (2006) concluded that libraries serving socially excluded residents in the community fall under the fairness and equity doctrine.

Technologies such as E-books and digital data repositories may bring another level of social justice issues for rural residents. It is understandable that users with no Internet access can hardly keep updated with a library’s e-mail newsletters. It is an economic barrier to the access of information for many under-privileged citizens who simply cannot access the digital world or cannot afford to purchase e-books or e-readers. Social inclusion can minimize the issue of digital divide. Pateman and Vincent (2010) defined social inclusion as a paradigm in public library services that include service to active users, passive (occasional) users, and non-users through community engagement, and they suggested library usage may grow more if libraries make more of an effort to serve on services to non-users than passive and active users (p. 130). These include low-income families, homeless patrons, those in need of help accessing digital resources, and socially excluded groups including senior citizens, immigrants who are cultural and linguistic minorities, and members of the community who need the Internet.

Socially excluded populations often have fewer opportunities in the digital society due to the gap caused by digital divide. Norris (2001, p. 4) defined three aspects of the term digital divide: the global divide as “the divergence of Internet access between industrialized and developing societies”; the social divide concerning “the gap between information rich and poor in a nation”; and the democratic divide signified by the difference between “those who do, and do not, use the collection of digital resources to engage, mobilize, and participate in public life.” Social status contributes to digital divide. For example, a Pew Research survey found that in the United States, adult cellphone ownership reached 91% by May 2013 but was lower among those who did not attend college, those living in household with an income of less than $30,000, those who are older, and those in rural areas¹. Only 85% of adults living in rural areas and only 76% of people 65 and older own a cell phone.

3 Case Studies

Case 1. Below is interview with a small rural library director reveals the impact of geographical location to central cites:

Q: What is special about rural libraries?
A: Because of money and population, big city and rural libraries don’t have a lot of commons. Big cities just have the attitude that because we have more people than yours, our needs are more important than your people’s. That is not true. Actually, our patrons’ needs are just as great if not more so than in big city. We don’t have bookstores really close, 80 miles from the bookstore. Technically, our people’s needs are greater than people in Austin (note: Austin is the capitol of the State of Texas, United States). It is not our fault if we have fewer patrons, since that is what it is.

That is the very important point that our patrons are just important as Austin downtown patrons.

The case above suggested that user needs in rural areas maybe more demanding than those in urban settings. For example, Chu (1999) emphasized that literacy, as it is applied to linguistic minorities, needs to be understood “as a discourse of power” (p. 339) and must be redefined “for librarians to provide appropriate services” (p. 344). Although the Internet enables many users to seek health-related information

¹ http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/06/06/cell-phone-ownership-hits-91-of-adults/
online, many community residents are interested in community health fairs where various services are performed by health professionals. Rural libraries can be related to public health information seeking.

**Case 2.** To bridge digital divide, another example is libraries providing health information literacy services. The Motley County Library, in Matador, TX, located approximately 80 miles northeast of Lubbock, Texas, partnered with The Motley County Clinic, the primary health care facility for Matador, and the surrounding area and hosted a community health fairs in 2012. According to the 2010 Census, the population of Motley County is 1,210. The event developed programs that increased patron participation and patron familiarity with electronic and digital resources.

Both cases above suggested that small libraries can use social justice and right of access information as tools to bridge the gap of digital divide. An Institute of Museum and Library Services (2013) report indicated that overall staffing level in rural libraries have decreased in recent years. The median number of librarians (full time employee) is 1.0, and many of rural libraries do not have librarians working at full-time schedule.

Regardless of limited resources, many rural librarians provide excellent professional support to poor and remote neighborhoods, minority and immigrants, senior and homebound citizens who may need the Internet more for information access.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

The solution to bridge digital divide seems to be the frame work of digital inclusion and digital literacy training. As Real, Bertot, and Jaeger (2014) suggested, one to understand the importance individuals access to digital technologies as well as how to use them (p. 8). It is utterly important for libraries to train digital literacy skills and knowledge related to language, hardware, and software in order to navigate and access digital information.

People who shy away from using digital and handheld devices are excluded today’s digital society, and those who are not efficient at using computers find it hard to apply jobs without using a computer or having an email account. Multiple platforms and sizes of digital devices can confuse users such as senior residents and rural residents, who then shy away from using library e-books and electronic resources.

Partially due to evolving technologies in people’s life, rural libraries face challenges in terms of service values and funding opportunities. However, the foundation of the success of libraries lies in the belief that libraries are beneficial to the public. As Dewey (1938) emphasized, education is not simply for the sake of intellect but it is tied to social action and progress. If a library is underappreciated as a community asset, and is forced to compete for community resources, it is often because the library is not viewed as an essential element in the community. Libraries in these situations need to assert their value as essential components of the community that are social commodities.

5 References


