# Libraries, the Internet, and Democracy

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**D**emocracies need libraries. Since their inception, libraries have served as pivotal community institutions upholding, strengthening, and realizing some of the most fundamental democratic ideals of our society. Libraries are the only American institutions that make knowledge, ideas, and information freely available to all citizens. They are where people can find differing opinions on controversial questions and dissent from current orthodoxy. They serve as the source for the pursuit of independent thought, critical attitudes, and in-depth information. And in so doing, they guard against the tyranny of ignorance, the Achilles heel of every democracy.

An informed public constitutes the very foundation of a democracy—after all, democracies are about discourse, discourse among the people. Consequently, the pursuit of knowledge and self-enlightenment lies at the heart of this democracy. That is, if a free society is to survive, it must ensure the preservation and provision of accessible knowledge for all its citizens. Note that libraries in a free society perform the fundamental function of keeping the public well informed. Libraries are the cornerstone of democracy in our communities because they assist the public in locating a diversity of resources and in developing the information literacy skills necessary to become responsible, informed citizens and to participate in our democracy. As James Madison eloquently stated: "Knowledge will forever govern ignorance and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives. A popular government without popular information or means of acquiring it is but a prologue to a farce or tragedy or perhaps both."

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Libraries ensure the freedom of speech, the freedom to read, the freedom to view. A truly democratic institution, libraries are for everyone, everywhere—no one should be excluded. They provide safe spaces for public dialogue. They provide the resources needed for the public to inform itself in order to participate in every aspect of our information society. They disseminate information so the public can participate in self-governance. They provide access to government information so that the public can monitor the work of its elected officials and benefit from the data collected and disseminated by public policy makers. In America, libraries were "invented" and exist in order to give all people equal access to learning and self-determination. Libraries are uniquely democratic.

## Libraries and Civil Society

As libraries serve to prepare citizens for a lifetime of civic participation, they also encourage the development of civil society. They provide the information and the opportunities for dialogue that the public needs to make decisions about common concerns. As community forums, they encourage active citizenship and renew communities. When people are better informed, they are more likely to participate in policy discussions in which they can communicate their ideas and concerns freely. Most important, citizens need civic spaces where they can speak freely, share similar interests and concerns, and pursue what they believe is in their interest.

Effective citizen action is possible when citizens develop the skills to gain access to information of all kinds and to put such information to effective use. Librarians teach the public how to identify and evaluate information that is essential to making decisions that affect the way they live, work, learn, and govern themselves. Beyond the individual, libraries also provide the real and virtual spaces for members of the community to exchange ideas—ideas fundamental to democratic participation and civil society. Ultimately, discourse among informed citizens assures civil society; and civil society provides the social capital necessary to achieve sovereignty of the people, by the people, and for the people.[1]

## The Information Rich and the Information Poor

No city in the world enjoys such rich cultural and information resources as my hometown—New York. And no city contains so many rich residents. At the

same time, New York also harbors some of the poorest people in America, impoverished not just by their incomes, but also by their lack of access to the wealth of information and other cultural resources that surround them. While the digital age promises the potential of closing this gap between rich and poor, the haves and have-nots will likely grow further apart in the race to dominate commerce in the digital age. Electronic entrepreneurs become millionaires overnight and science and knowledge advance at breakneck speed. Nevertheless, this new age of abundance, now stripping away the ravages of scarcity, has yet to benefit many of those left behind and has yet to close the gap between the information rich and information poor.

While e-commerce creates a new class of information rich, many of New York's children suffer from poor reading abilities. School libraries lack both books and professional staff to improve reading scores even though studies have proven that good school media programs increase learning. Twenty percent of American adults do not read well enough to earn a living wage. Public libraries in New York lose one-quarter of their staff each year because of low salaries and, thus, barely supplement the poor services offered to children in the schools.

By contrast, New York boasts a magnificent new science and industry library with access to electronic databases that many of the Fortune 500 companies lack and a refurbished humanities center that is the envy of all America. The public libraries have worked hard to supplement their diverse collections and services by providing Internet and electronic database access in branches located in virtually every neighborhood in the city. But demand for unfettered access dramatically outstrips supply; and, regrettably, too much of this demand results from New York's poor-quality school libraries, which are forced to filter the Internet, severely limiting access to the most basic resources.

Indeed, college students at private universities in the city wallow in lush, extensive library collections supplemented by thousands of licensed electronic tools, while students at public universities have barely the books or electronic databases to complete their class assignments, let alone advance scholarship. As compensation, libraries should offer the equal opportunities Americans seek to succeed in the information society; yet libraries are stressed to the limit in their abilities to deliver on this covenant.

This is a hard story to tell, but there is reason for optimism. The Internet promises to bridge the gap between the information haves and have-nots in New York and elsewhere. No longer hindered by geographic, linguistic, or economic barriers, electronic information can span boundaries and reach into any neighborhood with just the click of a mouse. Truly, the dream of an equitable

information society offers new hope for rekindling the democratic principles put forth by our founding fathers in the Constitution. Even if a household cannot afford or chooses not to connect to the Internet, families have the option of logging on at a library or school. Under the universal service provisions of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, nearly every community will soon be connected, thus ensuring an on-ramp to the information superhighway providing an opportunity for everyone to participate in their communities' economic, educational, social, political, and leisure activities.

The Clinton administration has drawn the nation's attention to the "digital divide" and the gap between the information rich and poor in America.[2] Recent research indicates that, despite a significant increase in computer ownership and overall usage, many low income, minority, disabled, rural, and inner city groups are falling behind in their ownership of computers and access to telecommunications networks. And, beyond the purchase of hardware and connectivity to the Internet, librarians have stepped into this gap to ensure public access to a broad array of information resources, promoting twenty-first century literacy and reducing barriers to intellectual freedom and fair use.

## The Digital Content Divide

Into the milieu of this new century comes the Internet with affordable and accessible content, content that was previously unavailable to many communities, both in the United States and abroad. However, access to an abundance of information does not necessarily mean access to a diversity of sources. Cyberspace is sparse when it comes to local information, particularly for rural communities and for those living at or near the poverty level. The vast majority of Internet sites are designed for people with average or advanced literacy levels. For the more than 20 percent of Americans whose reading levels limit them to poverty wages and for the 30 million Americans speaking a language other than English, few Web sites are readily comprehended.[3] Furthermore, ethnic and racial minorities are unlikely to find content about the uniqueness of their cultures. A recent report by the Children's Partnership estimated that at least 50 million Americans—roughly 20 percent—faced a content-related barrier that stood between them and the benefits of the Internet. For example, in March 2000 only three Web sites could be found for institutions operating in Harlem. The Children's Partnership study also indicates that adults want practical information focusing on local community, information at a basic literacy level, content for non-English speakers, and racial and ethnic cultural

information. It also found that Internet use among low-income Americans was for self-improvement, whether for online courses, job searches, or other information. In short, the poor and marginalized individuals seek information that helps them with their day-to-day problems and enables them to participate as members of their democratic community.

Libraries are well positioned to meet these needs. Targeting Web sites and digital library development toward special populations is crucial if we are to ensure widespread participation in the information society. We must ensure that sites are easy to navigate, translated into languages spoken by residents, and responsive to local needs. Information equity must become a priority for the entire community. We must purchase licensed materials and convert older items that contain content of interest to those at the margins of our communities. Libraries must join forces with community groups and institutions to bridge the digital content divide.

## Information Literacy in a Highly Mediated World

Copyright registrations now exceed 560,000 per year. The number of new book titles published annually in the United States has jumped more than 30 percent over the last decade. More than 100,000 federal and 10,000 United Nations documents enter circulation annually, along with untold numbers of state and local documents.

Even more astounding is the exponential growth of the Web. A February 1999 study reported in *Nature* concluded there were about 800 million publicly available Web pages, with about 15 trillion bytes of textual information and 180 million images weighing in at about 3 trillion bytes of data. The rapid growth of the Web is estimated to be slightly more than doubled in size every year, though some sources estimate that it doubles every six months.[4] As of April 2000, the Censorware home page reported that the Internet included 1,820,000,000 Web pages and 409,000,000 images; and that the lifespan of a Web page is about 44 days, which means that 41,300,000 pages and 9,300,000 images change daily. In just the last 24 hours, the Web has added 3,690,000 new pages and 831,000 new images.[5]

Yet as many librarians know too well, much of the information available over the Internet is either erroneous or tailors its information to advocate a position; there is no validation like peer review to guide users. Much of the "good" information is licensed and restricted to those who have invested and contracted for access. Not surprisingly, the complexity of finding, evaluating, and using

information in the electronic age has become a major challenge for the 60 percent of the workforce that engages in some information-related activity. Librarians are needed more than ever to ensure that the public has the information literacy skills it needs to live, work, learn, and govern in the digital age.

Americans need sophisticated information literacy skills to succeed in the twenty-first century. Even those already proficient at finding, evaluating, and applying information to solve daily problems can be overwhelmed by the proliferation of information and the difficulty of sorting through it. To cope successfully, citizens must be able to identify, evaluate, and apply information and communicate it efficiently and effectively. Americans will have to become information literate to flourish in the workplace as well as to carry out the day-to-day activities of citizens in a developed, democratic society. Libraries of all types must work together to develop a process to engage community groups in identifying information needs, initiate a dialogue aimed at encouraging a more information-literate populace, and facilitate the development of skills to use information strategically. Granted, the need for information literacy skills has been around for generations; nevertheless, the dawning of the information society forces us to develop broader information skills if we are to separate the wheat from the chaff, the true from the untrue, the rumor from the real.

In the contemporary environment of rapid technological change and proliferating information resources, communities face diverse, abundant information choices. The uncertain quality and expanding quantity of information pose large challenges for society. The sheer abundance of information will not in itself create a more informed citizenry without a complementary cluster of abilities necessary to use information effectively.

## Community Networks

Comparable to libraries, community networks such as freenets create channels of communication for public dialogue. The movement toward community networks reflects the desire for a democratic institution capable of recognizing the centrality of information access and communication to modern life. Here too, libraries have led. Working closely with a broad array of community partners, the conceptualization of these networks derives directly from the model of the public library. Community networks offer many of the services provided by libraries, including training, e-mail, Web page development, and small business assistance. They also focus users on local assets and services, pulling together essential information and communication resources that might otherwise be difficult to identify or

locate. Of special interest here, they offer opportunities for libraries to collaborate and build partnerships in support of local history projects, civic education programs, and community enterprises—such as information and referral services— that might be overlooked by the commercial sector. Significantly, librarians bring added value to this movement by offering skills and expertise to those who sustain these ventures. Especially for public libraries, community networks offer an exceptional opportunity for them to forge new roles in their communities.[6]

## Government Information

Over the last decade, the persistent voice of librarians and the promise of new technologies have improved access to government information. The result has been the promotion of the public's right to know along with the advancement of citizens' involvement in governance. A fifteen-year struggle to promote equal, ready, and equitable access to government information culminated in passage of the GPO Access Act, the Electronic Freedom of Information Act, and other policies endeavoring to strengthen public access in the digital age. Still the victory has been incomplete. While the public benefits from ever more direct access to government records and documents (witness the speed with which the unedited version of Kenneth Starr's report reached citizens' hands), more and more data were slipping into private hands, getting classified under the guise of national security, or exempted from release under the Freedom of Information Act. In 1999 a proposal to ensure permanent public access to electronic government documents was forwarded by the library community to Congress and promptly ignored. At that very moment, links to important documents disappeared unnoticed, and a court of appeals allowed federal agencies to destroy electronic documents resident in word-processing or e-mail systems once a copy was made for record keeping. So while public access to government information produced at taxpayer expense is more freely available than ever before, the threat to public access persists. Yet even more vulnerable, state and local electronic information rarely falls under depository and other open-access statutes. We should savor our victories while recognizing that we must remain vigilant and continue the struggle for truly open access.

## Copyright and Fair Use

Against the promise of easy access to networked electronic information loom new technological protection measures. The ubiquity of digital information,

the widespread use of networks, and the proliferation of the Web create new tensions in the intellectual property arena. The ease with which data may be copied impels information producers to seek ways of protecting their investments. Their intentions are perfectly understandable. Unfortunately, measures proposed to protect creators endanger users' fair-use rights to view, reproduce, and quote limited amounts of copyrighted materials. This high-stakes policy debate might well result in a pay-per-view or—even more chilling—a pay-per-slice digital information economy, in which only those willing and able to pay can access electronic information. With librarians in the vanguard, the delicate balance between creators' and users' rights to information has been carefully negotiated for print materials over the past century. However, as we enter the information age, the balance has begun to tilt toward intellectual property owners. Should this imbalance persist, it will endanger free speech, the promotion of learning, and the rekindling of civil society.

The Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998 was the first measure to criminalize illegal use of digital materials and places additional limits on the rights of electronic information users. As a consequence, the widespread deployment of pay-per-view systems could effectively reduce libraries from repositories of valuable knowledge to mere marketing platforms for content distributors. Fair use was only negotiated into the bill after librarians and public interest activists threatened to defeat it. Subsequently, fair use barely survived as new restrictions were imposed on unauthorized access to technologically restricted work. The act prohibits the circumvention of any effective technological protection measure (TPM) used by a copyright holder to restrict access to its material unless adverse affects on the fair use of any class of work can be demonstrated. Thus, the burden of proof rests with those of us seeking open access and the free flow of information.

A second copyright-related bill, the Collections of Information Antipiracy Act, will protect investment rather than creativity for database companies and overturn more than 200 years of information policy that has consistently supported unfettered access to factual information. This bill draws its support from a small but powerful group of database publishers, including Lexis-Nexis (owned by Reed-Elsevier), the New York Stock Exchange, and the National Association of Realtors, and will allow a producer or publisher unprecedented control over the uses of information, including factual information as well as government works. Even though the Supreme Court had held that constitutional copyright principles prohibit ownership of facts or works of the federal government and current copyright law already protects database companies,

some corporations continue to press hard for this overly broad protectionist legislation. Should they succeed, they will accomplish a radical departure from the current intellectual property framework that protects expression—not investment—and thereby endanger the doctrine of fair use. If these special interests prevail, we will wind up with a pay-per-view digital economy where the free flow of ideas is limited to the obsolescent world of print and photocopy machines.[7]

## Universal Service and Filtering

Since the early decades of the twentieth century, Americans have held the belief that maximum access to public information sources and channels of communication is necessary for political, economic, and social participation in a vigorous democracy. Everyone must have access to information communication networks in order to participate in our democratic way of life. Under the universal service provisions of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the Federal Communications Commission has authorized a program to ensure equitable access to telecommunications technologies by offering schools and libraries discounted rates that were once reserved for only the largest corporate customers. In this way, schools and libraries may be connected as a first step toward widespread public access. Known as the E-Rate, more than $2 billion in discounts and grants is now earmarked annually for distribution from fees collected by long distance phone carriers. In addition, the E-Rate helps bridge the digital divide by expanding access and connectivity to needy communities.[8] Still, it took some horse trading to gain acceptance for the E-Rate. Telecommunications companies agreed to this amendment to the 1996 Telecommunications Act in return for deregulation of their markets. Even so, several of the major carriers who benefited most from deregulation have tried to sabotage this program through court challenges and by highlighting the universal service charge on consumer bills without explanation, thereby inciting their enormous customer base.

Where corporate attempts to stop the flow of subsidies to schools and libraries ended, Congress has added its own twists. New laws that require local communities to install filters to protect children from obscenity and child pornography in order to receive E-Rate and other subsidies threaten the feasibility of the funds. Attempts to tie federal funding to content restrictions raise serious constitutional questions similar to those brought forward in *Reno v. American Civil Liberties Union* (1997), which challenged the constitutionality

of the Communications Decency Act. These laws will impose federal regulations over local community control of information access. First Amendment protections must extend to the digital sphere if we are to ensure open dialogue across the full spectrum of opinion in the information age.

Many states have proposed or passed similar laws to restrict Internet access in schools and libraries by mandating a filtering requirement in order for these institutions to receive state and local funding. Unfortunately, filters do more harm than good; they sweep too broadly, blocking only some of the sites with indecent materials while restricting access to legal and useful resources. In those libraries that currently employ filters, users complain that they block such home pages as Super Bowl XXX, the Mars Exploration site (MARSEXPL), a site on swan migration in Alma, Wisc. (swANALma), Mother Jones magazine, the National Rifle Association, and millions of other sites of legitimate interest. Filtering systems have trouble distinguishing between users who are six and sixteen years old and apply the common denominator of the youngest users at the expense of all others.

Furthermore, filters are not effective in blocking much material that some consider undesirable for children; they give parents a false sense of security, leading them to believe that their children are protected from harm. Most importantly, filters do not take the place of preferred routes that include the development of community-based Internet Access Policies, user education programs, links to great sites, and safety guidelines. The extraordinary benefits of Internet access are too often overshadowed by controversies fueled by groups who stoke imagined fears about the power of images and words in an effort to control access to information. According to a recent study by the National Coalition against Censorship, "the evidence of harm from Internet access at public institutions is at best equivocal, and the blunt-edged approach advocated by pro-censorship advocates ignores the individualized need of children and their parents. Fortunately, most libraries have found ways of balancing the interests of all parties effectively, without censorship. . . ."[9]

## The Tide of the Information Age

Over the last twenty years, with the emergence of personal computers and telecommunications technologies, we have seen a transformation of the information creation, transport, and dissemination industries from independent operators mostly involved with infrastructure to a highly integrated, multinational sphere of megacompanies looking to optimize profits and dominate

access to home and business. In the United States, a period of deregulation and privatization has shifted the information policymaking arena to the private sector, where questions of the public interest are harder to raise.

What is at stake is not only the availability and affordability of information essential to the public interest, but also the very basis upon which local libraries serve the public's information needs. As communications and media industry giants stake their claims in cyberspace, the public interest must not be overlooked. The new information infrastructure must ensure public spaces that are filled by educational and research institutions, libraries, nonprofits, and governmental organizations charged with promoting and fulfilling public policy goals. They must constitute a public sphere of free speech and open intellectual discourse, which enhances democracy.

If the public's right to know is to be protected within a free-market national information infrastructure, the library community must work together with public groups, who must stand up and speak out for the public interest. Librarians are well positioned to lead the charge because we are committed to ensuring the free flow of information in our society and we understand what is at stake. Librarians have already staked a claim in the newly emerging national information infrastructure. After all, we are the information professionals who represent more than half of the country's adults, as well as three-quarters of its children, who use libraries. Librarians excel at identifying, acquiring, organizing, housing, preserving, archiving, and assisting in the use of information. We have extensive experience working with community groups in providing essential local information and promoting the public's right to know. Furthermore, local libraries serve as the community's historic, cultural, political, and social record and are identified as a center for reflection and stimulation by area residents. We inform citizens about the activities of their local, state, and federal governments through depository and other government information dissemination programs.

What the library community brings to the information infrastructure issue is the perspective of cooperative, not competitive, information professionals serving the public interest. Politically neutral institutions, libraries are charged with strengthening democracy by facilitating public access to information in all its forms. The library mission includes providing such access regardless of a person's economic status, education level, or information-seeking skills. In an electronic age, this mission requires equal, ready, and equitable access to the nation's telecommunications infrastructure, access that will be even more crucial in the future. Without technologically sophisticated libraries available in every community, the evolving information infra-

structure can only intensify the gulf between the information rich and the information poor.

## Librarians Leading the Charge for Public Access

Librarians must act quickly and decisively to affect the ever-growing policy issues that will change the means by which information is produced and distributed. Neutrality will not work; the stakes are very high—namely, our democratic way of life, which depends upon an informed electorate. We must recognize why these issues are so important. We must be informed about the issues and the players on all sides. However, we cannot be effective on our own. We must work together with others to make a difference. We must enter the struggle adequately armed. We must make every effort to balance the influence of a well-organized corporate community. We must build coalitions to promote public access, to increase our strength and influence, and to galvanize grass-roots action.

The promises of the twenty-first-century information society must not be placed in peril by those intent on restricting public access to information and the free flow of ideas. A high-tech society must not become a highly controlled society. The vigilance and activism of those concerned with protecting free expression is more important than ever if the American ideals embedded in the First Amendment of the Constitution are to remain the beacon of our way of life in the new millennium. We must speak up and fight for information equity for all. Otherwise, we will endanger our most precious right in a democratic society—the right of free speech and inquiry.

## Notes

1. In recent years, the essential processes of democracy have undergone serious rethinking led by Robert Putnam's analysis of social capital and its relationship to civic participation cum civil society. See, for example, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 1 (Jan. 1995): 65–78, and *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).
2. For a more detailed view of the "digital divide," see *Falling through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, National Telecommunications and Information Administration, vols. 1–3, 1995, 1998, 1999, 2000, www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahom/fttn99; *What's Going On, Losing*

*Ground Bit by Bit: Low-Income Communities in the Information Age*, Washington, D.C.: Benton Foundation, 1998, www.benton.org/Library/Low-Income; and Thomas P. Novak and Donna L. Hoffman, "Bridging the Digital Divide: The Impact of Race on Computer Access and Internet Use," Nashville, Tenn., Vanderbilt University e-lab manuscripts, Feb. 2, 1998, www2000.ogsm.vanderbilt.edu/papers/race/science.html.

3.  The Children's Partnership, *Online Content for Low-Income and Underserved Americans: The Digital Divide's New Frontier—A Strategic Audit of Activities and Opportunities* (Washington, D.C.: Children's Partnership, 2000).

4.  See Steve Lawrence and C. Lee Giles, "Searching the World Wide Web," *Science* 280 (Apr. 3, 1998): 98–100, and "Accessibility of Information on the Web," *Nature* 400 (July 8, 1999): 107–9.

5.  The Censorware Project home page provides a daily count on Web size at www.censorware.org/web_size.

6.  For more information about community networks, see Joan Durrance and Karen Pettigrew, "Community Information: The Technological Touch," *Library Journal* 125, no. 2 (Feb. 1, 2000): 44–46; Douglas Schuler, "Let's Partner as Patriots: The Future of Democracy May Lie in Linking Libraries with Community Networks," *American Libraries* 28, no. 8 (Sept. 1997): 60–62; and Douglas Schuler, *New Community Networks: Wired for Change* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1996).

7.  Up-to-date information about copyright issues is available from the American Library Association's Washington Office Web site at www.ala.org/washoff/copyright.html, which links to numerous other sites concerned with protecting fair use in the digital age.

8.  For more information about the E-Rate, see the American Library Association's Washington Office Web site, www.ala.org/washoff/e-rate.html.

9.  See the National Coalition against Censorship, *The Cyber-Library: Legal and Policy Issues Facing Public Libraries in the High-Tech Era* (New York: NCAC, 1999), 8, www.ncac.org/cyberlibrary.html; the American Library Association, Office of Intellectual Freedom Web site www.ala.org/oif.html; and the Freedom to Read Foundation Web site at www.ftrf.org/index.html. Up-to-date information about congressional bills that require filtering is available on the ALA Washington Office Web site on E-Rate issues, www.ala.org/washoff/e-rate.html.