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The Dangerous Divide: How a Pandemic Exposed the Problem of Older Adults and Equal Access and How Libraries Are Helping

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Two of the core values stated in the American Library Association's (ALA) *Core Values of Librarianship* are access and social responsibility. The first value maintains that libraries must make all information resources "readily, equally, and equitably accessible to all library users." The second value recognizes, in part, the role of libraries in "ameliorating or solving the critical problems of society" (American Library Association, 2020). Among these critical problems is the digital divide, in which equal access to modern information and technology resources is denied to users due to economic, geographic, and social disparities. These disparities include inequalities related to demographic differences in race, ethnicity, age, and education, among others (Schweitzer). Among the demographic groups on the negative side of this divide is older adults. (For this paper, *older adults* are defined as people age 65 and up. However, some sources cited in this paper use a different lower-age limit, which is noted as necessary.)

Closing the digital divide has been a pressing social justice issue since questions of how to ensure equal access to the internet and broadband were first raised over 25 years ago (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1995). In the meantime, libraries have played an important role in efforts to close the digital divide and increase access and usage for all users. Since the rise of the digital age, libraries have been a place in the community where older adults could access

information resources such as the internet and receive instruction on technology for free. With the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, however, most libraries were forced to close and/or severely curtail their resources as people were encouraged to socially distance and stay home. Remote access became the overlying solution for libraries and their users—a solution that had the effect of further exposing gaps in the digital divide. For many older adults—significantly, the most vulnerable population throughout the pandemic according to statistics cited by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)—being situated on the negative side of the digital divide has had especially dangerous implications.

Since the pandemic began, how have libraries tried to fill the gap and adjust their resources, and have their efforts been successful? This paper discusses the digital divide's impact on older adults and how libraries have contributed to close the divide for this particular demographic both pre- and mid-pandemic.

To better understand the digital divide and the disparity it exposes in certain age groups, some background information is useful. The ALA defines *digital divide* as "a term that refers to the economic and social inequality between demographics and regions that have access to modern information and communications technology and those that don't. . . . Even among populations with some access to technology, the digital divide can be evident in the form of lower-performance computers, lower-speed wireless connections, lower-priced connections such as dial-up, and limited access to subscription-based content" (American Library Association, 2015).

Nationally, the concept of a digital divide and its ramifications arose after a report in 1995 by the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) called *Falling Through the Net: A Survey of the "Have Nots" in Rural and Urban America.* The NTIA's report compiled research on the percentage of U.S. households with a telephone and/or computer to measure the U.S. telecommunications policy's goal of universal service. The report revealed wide disparities in service affecting people on the basis of geography, race, age, income, and education level. For example, rural households with an income of less than $10,000 had the lowest computer and modem penetration compared to households in central cities or suburban and urban areas (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1995).

Interestingly, the 1995 NTIA report showed more similarity between younger and older people for computer and internet access. Rural adults age 55 and older had the lowest computer penetration, followed by seniors living in central cities and young households (people under age 25) in rural areas. Modem penetration, however, was lowest among young rural adults, followed by rural adults between 45 and 54 years old and rural adults 55 and older. Yet rural young adults also ranked the highest among groups taking online courses, and many of the groups falling on the negative side of the digital divide were found to rank higher in terms of internet use for job searches, online courses, and government records retrieval, which suggested the potential for improvement in access over time (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1995).

Since the landmark report in 1995, the NTIA has conducted follow-up internet use surveys, most recently in 2019. The surveys show significant gains in internet use among older

adults age 65 and older, going from 7.2% in 1998 to 68% in 2019. Yet this 2019 percentage is still the lowest among all age groups surveyed. To compare with the second and third lowest usage groups, 70% of children between ages 3 and 14 report internet use, while adults ages 45 to 64 measure at 82.4% (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2020).

Other organizations that have tracked internet usage and broadband access in the United States report similar findings of a persistent age divide. In April 2021 the Pew Research Center released a report stating that 25% of adults age 65 and older surveyed said they never use the internet. This is considerably higher than the 4% of adults ages 50 to 64 who say they never go online. The Pew report states that the number of older adults using the internet has increased dramatically, citing 2000's figure of 86% of people age 65 and older who never went online. But the report notes, "Internet non-adoption is linked to a number of demographic variables, but is strongly connected to age—with older Americans continuing to be one of the least likely groups to use the internet" (Perrin & Atske). Thus, a divide persists.

To help close this divide and to fulfill the core values of librarianship that champion equal access to information to all users and social responsibility, libraries have played a role as advocates for resources for older adults that will increase their access to and usage of internet technology and their digital literacy. This advocacy is reflected at both the local library and larger association levels. The ALA addresses closing the digital divide for the older adult demographic in materials such as the Reference and User Services Association's (RUSA) *Guidelines for Library Services with 60+ Audience: Best Practices,* which were revised and approved in 2017 and include best practices for services and programming that offer technology training both onsite in libraries and at senior centers, nursing homes, and other

residential facilities; offer mobile technology labs or bookmobiles that can further serve the

homebound or those offsite or living remote from libraries with wifi, laptops, and e-readers;

provide assistive and adaptive equipment such as visual and auditory aids that minimize

accessibility and ability concerns; and reach out to those older adults already online through

social media and library websites and e-newsletters (American Library Association, 2017).

Another ALA resource is the *Keys to Engaging Older Adults* toolkit published in 2018.

This resource has guidance about avoiding ageist language, partnering with national and local

organizations for older adults, finding funding for programs, and improving accessibility for

older adults, including through assistive and adaptive technology. It also provides a list of model

programs at libraries around the country, many of which notably offer technology-focused

services such as computer classes, gaming, intergenerational tech training, and e-learning on

topics like health literacy (American Library Association, 2018).

As an example of how such programs play out in a local library, a 2019 *Online Searcher*

article titled "Librarians, Seniors, and the Challenge of Technological Education and Outreach"

by Carly Lamphere, a reference librarian at Crowell Public Library in San Marino, California,

discusses the everyday technology assistance she provides to older adults in her job. She writes,

"[U]sing the library's own desktop computers, we assist several older adults with basic

operation skills and questions. Seniors need technological literacy to operate their devices, but

to also help them tackle more complex forms of information literacy in their daily lives such as

discerning unreliable news sources and internet scams. Librarians are one of the first

responders on the technological and information literacy front lines and have many types of

strategies to assist and educate these patrons" (Lamphere, p. 51-52). Her library has responded

by implementing a one-on-one technology assistance program for older adults called Tech Time, which has garnered positive feedback from the patrons served.

Lamphere also cites a 2017 Pew survey about the significant increase in adults age 65 and older using the internet and smartphones and adopting broadband at home. Lamphere agrees that this is positive news, but wisely points out that this user group likely skews to upper-middle-class, wealthy, and educated, which does not include many other older adults. Instead, many older adults are being forced to adopt technology "not by curiosity or choice, but because of the general shift to more digital ways of life in present-day society" (p. 52). Such a distinction is important as it gives a clue as to why the digital divide persists, despite increasing technology adoption and the growing expectation of performing more day-to-day tasks and activities online.

It is also good to consider the reasons for a persistent divide, as they can not only point the way to possible solutions but also lead those who work with older adults, including librarians, away from ageist stereotypes about lack of technological initiative or ability. Going back to the NTIA's 1995 report on the digital divide and comparing it with the 2021 Pew report, many of the same "demographic variables" cited by Pew are consistent. Along with age, these variables tend to be household income, geographic location, and education level. Other factors that reappear in surveys about the divide are race, ethnicity, language, and health and ability. Many of these variables correlate with and compound each other. Furthermore are the issues of ever-evolving digital technology, new gadgetry, and the wide range in quality of services. The result is a "moving target" digital divide, as described by Bo Kinney of the Seattle Public Library

in a 2010 article in *Public Library Quarterly*, "The Internet, Public Libraries, and the Digital Divide."

Kinney writes, "The most persistent digital divides appear to separate Americans of differing income and education levels, race, and language. Additional divides exist along lines of region, age, and disability. Furthermore, while digital divides seem to narrow over time, new gulfs open up as new technologies are introduced. There has not been one single digital divide, but rather a series of divides that attend each new technology: first computers, then dial-up Internet access, then broadband access, and now mobile access. In addition, divides appear to exist in terms of quality of access, although these are less frequently measured" (Kinney, p. 111).

For older adults, the results of a 2020 research study commissioned by Older Americans Technology Services, Inc. (OATS) and the Humana Foundation reveal how disparity gets compounded to create a persistent divide. OATS analyzed a sample of 2,145 people age 63 and over who were interviewed for a National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project about internet access. Among their findings were that older adults with less than a high school degree or an income below $25,000 are 10 times more likely to not have adequate internet access. Health and ability disparities are reflected in the finding that older adults enrolled in Medicaid are more than two and half times likely to be offline, and those with functional impairments are twice as likely to be offline (Older Adults Technology Services, January 2021). Race and ethnicity, household composition (as in single adults versus couples or families), and geography also showed up as factors: "Black and Latino seniors are more than 2.5 and 3.3 times more

likely, respectively, to be offline. . . . An older adult in a rural area is 1.6 times more likely to lack

in-home internet service." Overall the OATS report estimates that nearly 22 million seniors, or

42% of the senior population in the United States, do not have internet broadband service at

home (Older Adults Technology Services, February 2021).

On its own, the persistent digital divide among a consistent set of demographic groups

conveys a failure of equity in access in the United States. With the COVID-19 pandemic,

however, the divide created a perfect storm, particularly for older adults.

The COVID-19 pandemic, during which much of life was moved to online and

necessitated home internet access, exposed just how many people easily fall through the cracks

in the digital divide and the dangerous consequences of leaving the gaps open. The issue of

affordable, quality internet access at home has affected everyone across the country from

parents with school-age children, teachers, and college students to clergy performing virtual

services, newly remote office workers, and librarians working from home or at their libraries

under conditions of severely curtailed hours and services. But for older adults, confined to their

place of residence (whether that was their house, a nursing home, or an assisted living facility

or senior group residence) for their own safety, lack of access to internet exposed another layer

of the health crisis.

COVID-19 has proven deadly for people of all ages, from infants to the elderly,

worldwide. Infection rates especially are widespread among multiple age groups (World Health

Organization, 2020). But the death rates for adults in their 60s and up are nothing short of

heartbreaking. Globally, as of mid-May 2021 there have been nearly 160 million confirmed

cases of COVID-19 and 3.2 million deaths, according to WHO. More than 32 million of these cases were reported in the United States, and more than 575,000 deaths (World Health Organization, 2021). CDC data for all deaths involving COVID-19 by age group as of May 2021 shows that the total of deaths from ages 0 to 64—at slightly more than 110,000—is less than the total for each of the remaining, older age groups alone. (The totals for people age 65 to 74 is about 124,000, for age 75 to 84 is 155,000, and for age 85 and over is 170,000.) Altogether, people age 65 and over have accounted for nearly 450,000 COVID deaths in the United States—a whopping 78% of the total death count thus far (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021).

But how does this connect to the digital divide? The connection may seem tenuous or non-existent, with the possible exception of increased loneliness due to enforced social isolation, a longstanding health problem for many older adults that most people of all ages are feeling the brunt of since the pandemic began (Holt-Lundstad). But in a society in which health care information and services are increasingly migrating to online, for older adults the lack of adequate (or any) internet access during a global pandemic has translated to lack of access to health information, difficulties in scheduling or keeping telehealth appointments that will keep them from traveling outside and risking exposure to the novel coronavirus, and difficulties in scheduling vaccinations, many of which required online registration and searching.

In late February 2021, when vaccination scheduling for older adults ramped up, a *New York Times* article described the "technological nightmare" experienced by many elderly people and their caregivers across the country as they struggled to book their lifesaving vaccinations

online. While elderly residents in nursing homes and assisted living facilities had assistance

when vaccines first became available, older adults living at home struggled to navigate "a maze

of confusing registration pages and clunky health care websites. . . . [T]he technological savvy

required to navigate the text alerts, push notifications and email reminders that are second

nature to the digital generation has put older adults . . . who need the vaccine the most, at a

disadvantage. As a result, seniors who lack tech skills are missing out on potentially lifesaving

shots" (Browning). And this is only those older adults fortunate enough to have internet access,

or a family member or other caregiver who does. As the OATS and Humana Foundation report

on older adults and the digital divide puts it: "Lack of internet is a public health crisis. . . . Lack of

internet is a social justice crisis."

The *New York Times* article also cites a number of volunteer and nonprofit-led programs

that popped up in recent months in response to the struggle to access health information and

appointments by older adults. Among these organizations is OATS, the group that partnered

with the Humana Foundation to conduct a study and release a report in early 2021 to highlight

the digital divide's impact on older adults during the pandemic. In the past, OATS has also

partnered with library systems such as the New York Public Library to provide specialized

computer instruction for older adults, as noted on the OATS website.

And yet the 2021 report cautions against overreliance on libraries, senior centers, and

other community organizations to fill the gap in internet access: "Relying entirely on

community institutions for internet access presents both inconvenience and risk for would-be

adopters among the senior population. Covid-19 has underscored the need for home-based

connectivity sufficient to enable users to perform daily tasks without traveling." Instead, the

report calls for greater government funding and tech industry involvement to close the divide.

But libraries can and should continue to play an important role: "Even if we reach full adoption

of home broadband by older adults at some point, there will be new devices, apps, and user

skills and knowledge that must be diffused through the population in a timely fashion. New

organizational capacity will be needed in senior centers, libraries, senior care facilities, and in

the nonprofit organizations that can forge partnerships with stakeholders in industry and

government" (Older Adults Technology Services, February 2021).

So how have libraries stepped up to help this demographic during the pandemic? How

have libraries committed to the core values of social responsibility and equity of access for all?

Both national reports by the ALA and local news pieces point to the creative and caring

ways libraries are working to include older adults in pandemic-response programming. The

ALA's *2021 State of America's Libraries Special Report: COVID-19* describes initiatives by public

libraries in Montana, Kentucky, and Massachusetts that enlisted children to send cards of

encouragement to isolated seniors at a local assisted living facility, arranged for a virtual

karaoke event, and installed mobile hotspots at a senior and veterans' centers in the

community (American Library Association, 2021).

In Missouri, the St. Louis County Library took advantage of $1 million funding through

the federal CARES Act to purchase 1,500 tablets for seniors to help them stay connected during

the pandemic. The tablets, which do not require hotspots, were preloaded with software and

data that made them easier to use for people who may have less familiarity with technology.

The tablets allow them to make phone and video calls, play games, contact a customer service representative, and register for their COVID vaccines through an easy one-touch process. The library's director, Kristen Sorth, makes it clear what values and issues are behind the initiative: "This is an equity initiative and so we are focused on lower-income seniors in our community who do not have a lot of technological resources available to them" (Townsend).

Numerous libraries turned themselves into vaccination information centers for older adults. In Napa County in California, library employees staffed a hotline specifically set up to help older adults navigate the technological problems they've encountered while trying to register for the vaccine (Klearman). The staff at the Madison Public Library in Lake County, Ohio, likewise spread the word that vaccine registration guidance and health information are available at their library. The library's director, Deeanna Culbertson, told local news that staff have set up seniors with emails for the first time for vaccine registration and provided hotspots to people who don't have the internet at home, with the goal of providing equal access (Goldenberg). A closer look at these initiatives shows efforts that effectively combine the provision of equal access with incremental steps toward basic digital literacy.

While the digital divide remains a crisis, especially in a time of global pandemic, libraries are proving to be one of the more reliable and flexible institutions to help close the divide by providing access and instruction in their communities. Clearly, the country needs more support and solutions from top-level branches and organizations, and local libraries cannot be expected to resolve a decades-long, systemic problem that affects multiple, overlapping demographics.

But the efforts of local libraries, and their commitments to the values of librarianship, count

and make a difference.

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