

Libraries Break Down Barriers for the Digitally Divided



Jessamyn West
librarian.net/talks/nyla18
#plsbreakbarriers



So thanks for having me. I love coming to New York. And visiting big(ger) cities where tech can seem more like a (potentially) cool and actually USEFUL thing and less (to some) like a hostile invader set on disrupting our way of life. I'm here to talk to you about the digital divide. What it is and how libraries are crucial to overcoming it. I'm here to do three things

1. Talk about some of the characteristics of the digitally divided and introduce the idea of digital readiness (orange county in 2012)
2. Introduce you to to the work and tactics of Phil Agre and build on some of it.
3. Open a conversation about ways we as librarians can make this situation better which can also be a framework for how to think about things during this and other conferences



And I should mention: these are mostly what we call soft skills. Hard to quantify, "high touch" qualitatively really useful.

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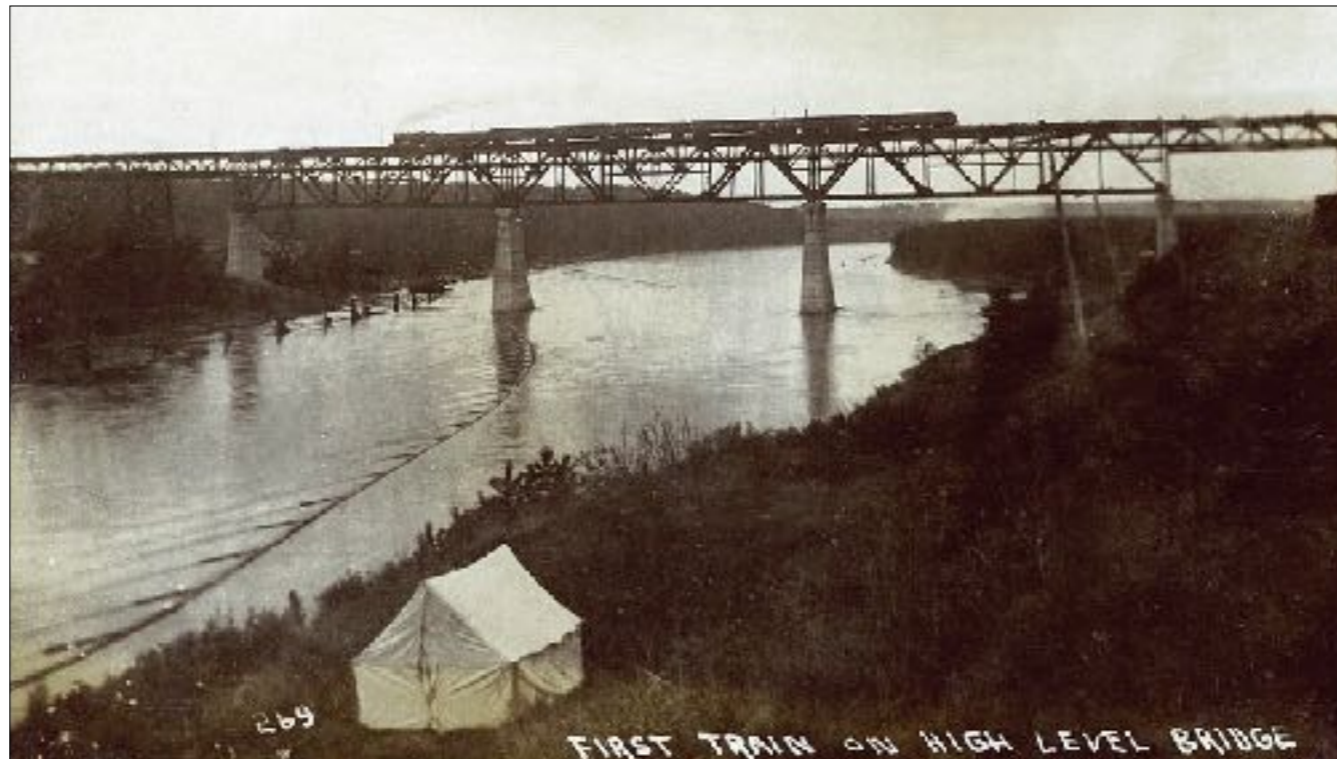
Computer people are fine human beings, but they do a lot of harm in the ways they "help" other people with their computer problems.

Phil Agre's How to help someone use a computer

If I was doing this talk in 45 seconds instead of 45 minutes, I'd say "The digital divide is important because 1. tech is important for personal and professional reasons especially as the world changes and digitally divided people get left behind 2. the people who are building a lot of the technology we use are (sometimes, often) making bad choices *because of* the digital divide and as a result they make things worse for everyone. Not on purpose, necessarily."

Librarians are usually somewhere between the first group of people (the divided) and the second (the techies and programmers).

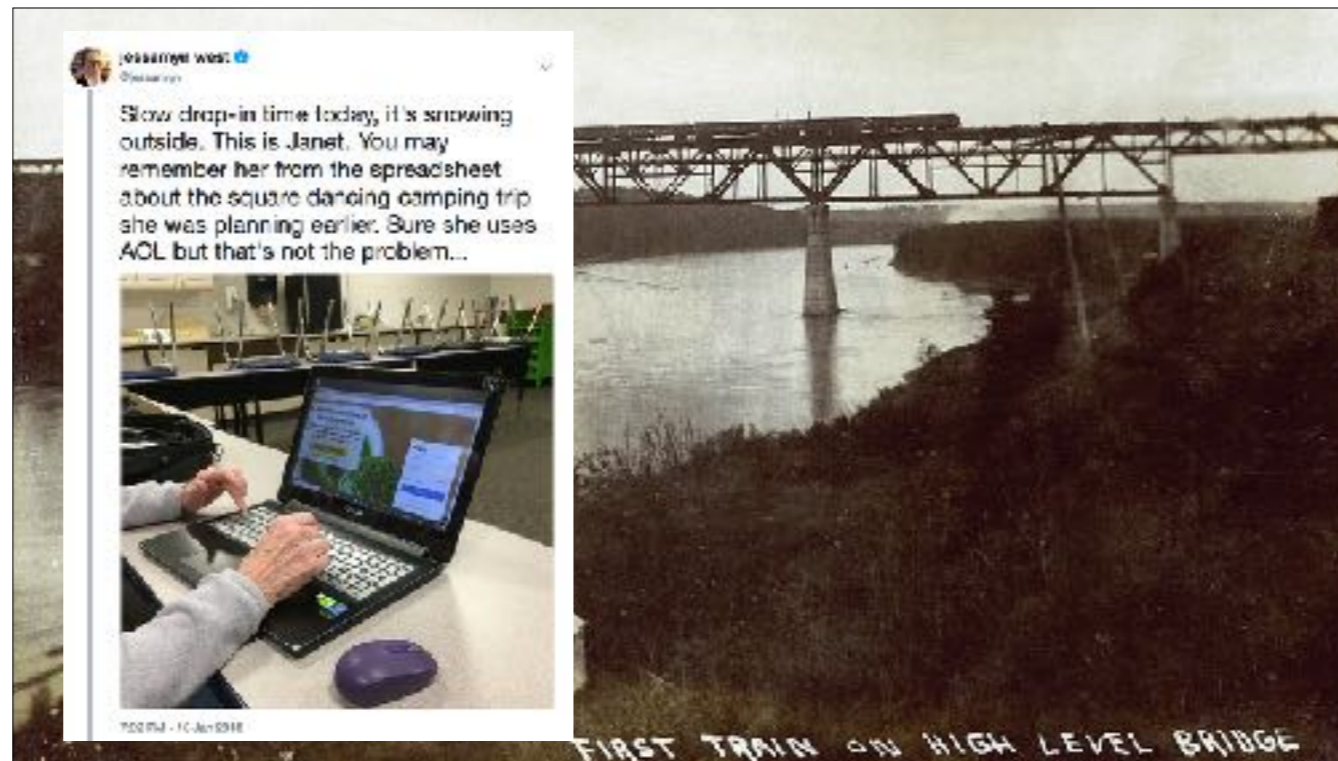
I'd also say "Read this list of things to know about how to teach people how to use computers by Phil Agre." It was written in 1996. It's still true today. I use some quotes from it throughout the talk. It's good advice because it's not just "Hold the mouse like this" but rather "Think about the world like THIS" useful for people like us and will plug into some other things I am going to talk about.



It's sort of hard to "show" the digital divide and this is part of the larger problem. Lots of pictures of bridges (anecdote: book cover, today's topic). Librarians tend to understand the issue—we see digitally divided people in our populations every day, but they can be a little INvisible to the people who create the technology that the digitally divided folks have to use. Part of the divide is the lack of overlap between tech-rich parts of society and tech-poor parts. This can be proximity, how far you are from Silicon Valley, but also demographically—age, class, race, gender.

20-something white men in US cities are building a lot of the technology that everyone else is using.

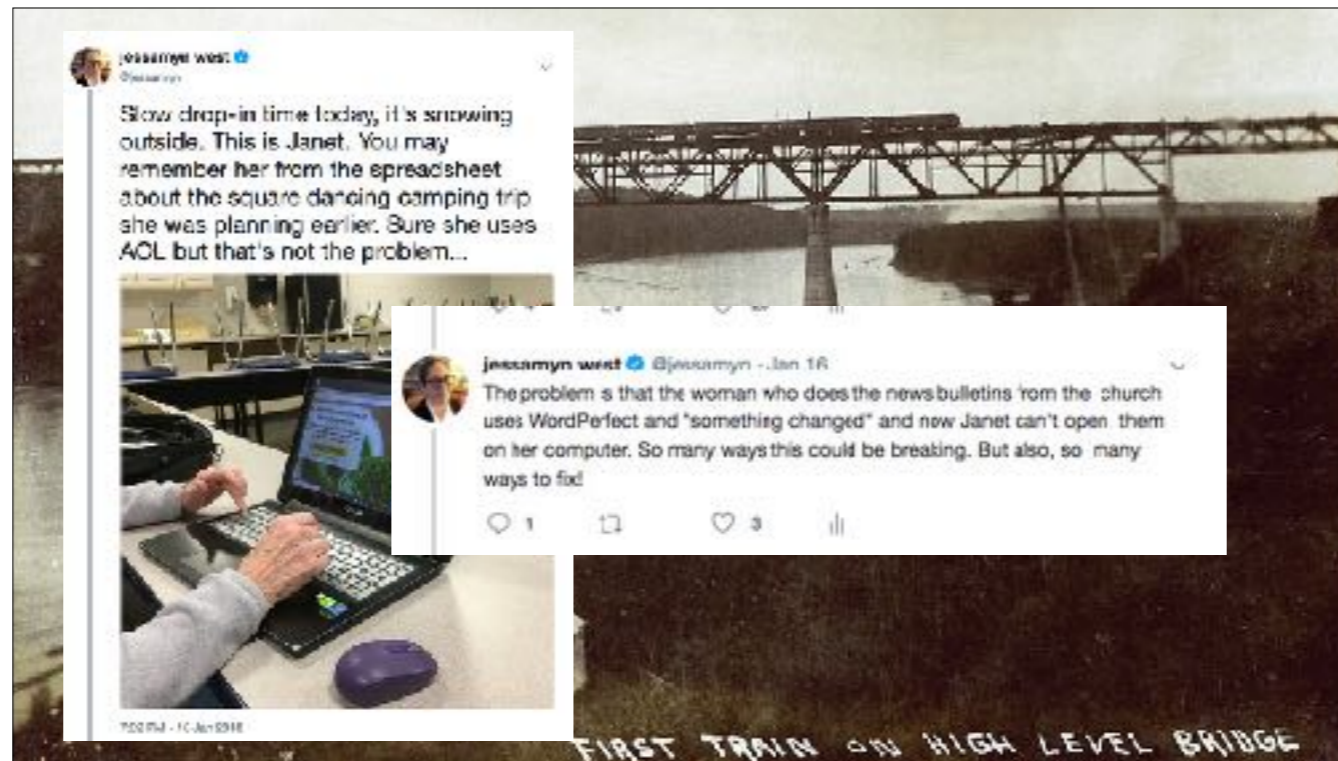
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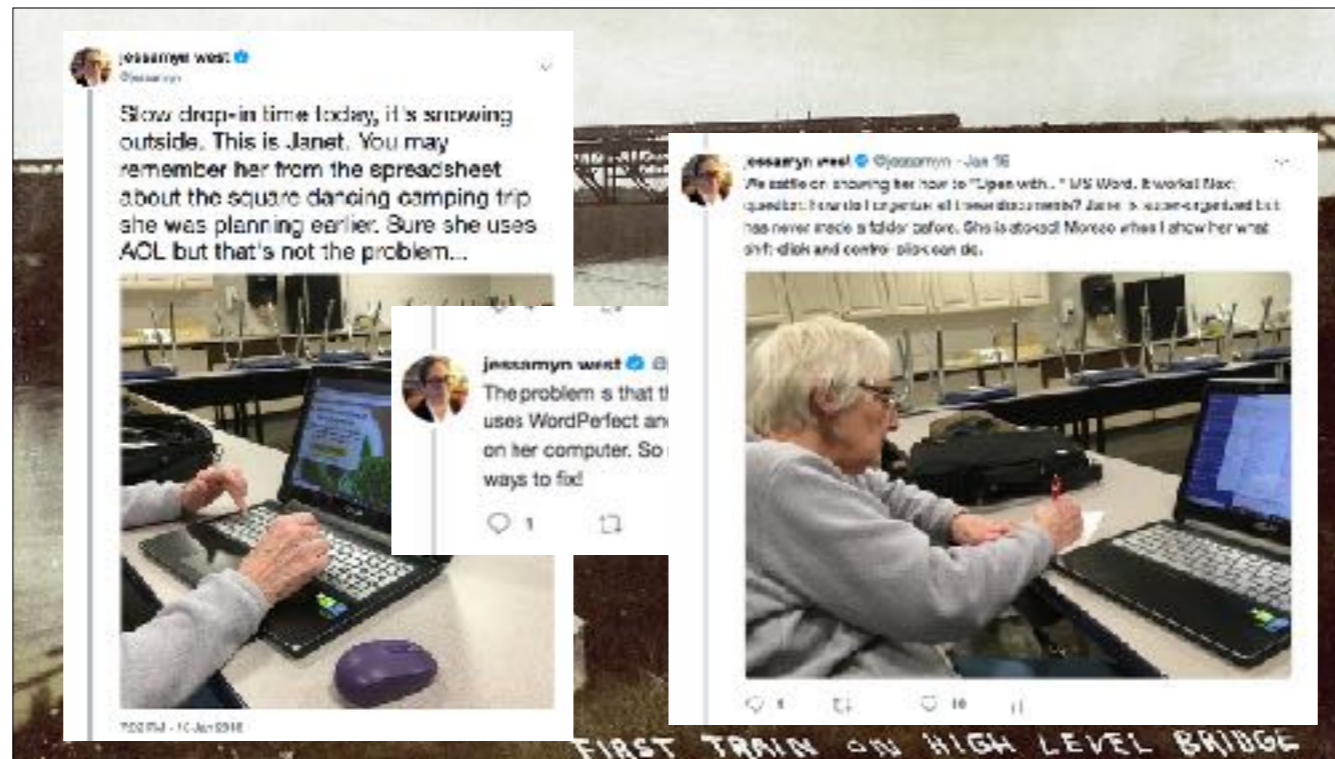
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13%

13% of American adults do not use the internet at all.
Additionally, 9% of adults use the internet but not at home.

Pew Research Center

We'll start here. This is a true fact. What's weird is I've been doing variants on this talk for over a decade and this number which was a little over 20% used to move and it doesn't anymore. Those 13% are staying put.

What does it mean to be offline? What are the outlines of the digital divide?

Three (or more) digital divides



Financial

People couldn't afford computers or broadband. Some still can't but libraries have filled that gap for most people.

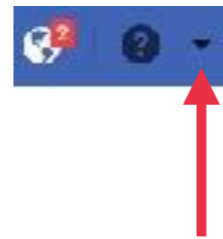
The idea of the digital divide sounds simple, but it is complex. It's not one thing anymore. It was and now it's not. It used to just be "Hey computers are expensive and people can't afford them..." or "Getting the internet is expensive and people can't afford THAT" But realistically now in the US 97% of our populations have access to public library service. It's not fixed but it's mostly ameliorated and has had remedies that work.

Three (or more) digital divides



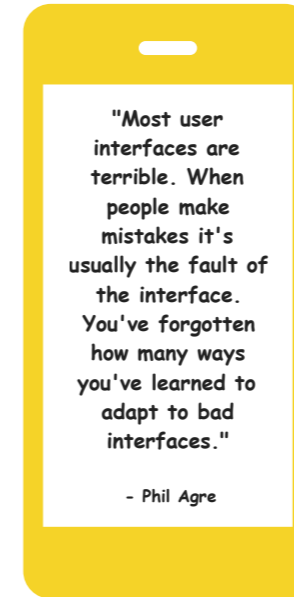
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Usability

Websites are hard to use and people have cognitive and physical challenges that make this harder than it needs to be.



"Most user interfaces are terrible. When people make mistakes it's usually the fault of the interface. You've forgotten how many ways you've learned to adapt to bad interfaces."

- Phil Agre

Secondly, there's the usability stuff or, as I like to call it in my facebook classes "let's learn where the tiny triangles are which hide all the stuff you want." Because seriously, this little triangle is dark blue on slightly lighter blue and it's 30-ish pixels on a 2000-ish pixel screen. That's a tough target. (click) The US healthcare debacle of a few years ago was a great example of this. Not only did people have to apply online, they were confronted with a terrible poorly-functioning website to do it.

People got driven online, in droves, were forced to interact with this website and walked away thinking "Computers are hard" That is a failure on so many levels, and extra sad because it was untrue and avoidable. People who think they are bad at computers are often just having trouble with interfaces.

We can help with this with our advocacy and our own good practices. Build good, tested, usable websites. Demand them from your vendors.

Three (or more) digital divides



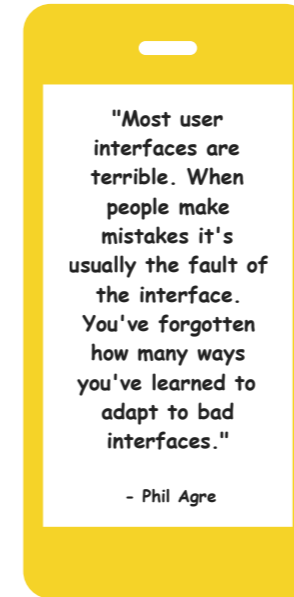
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Empowerment

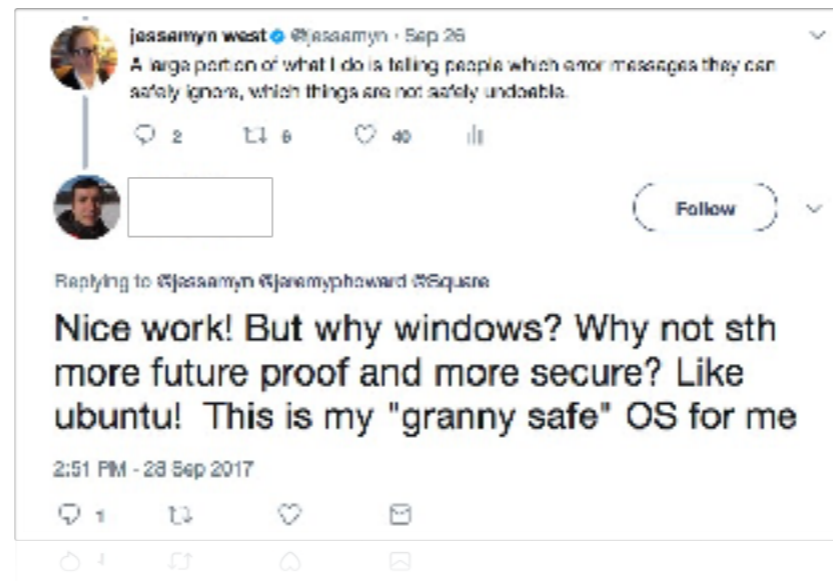
People don't "see themselves" in online spaces and don't see it as a place where they belong.

And then there's empowerment. Offline people look at ads like these grinning white people all wrapped up in their own devices ignoring each other and say "That's not what I want. Why would someone think I want that?"

A lot of people who are not fully online have ... concerns. I used to moderate a giant online community, helped keep people from fighting with each other. The line I use about heavily online users is that they're online for a reason. Maybe they have a disabled family member they're caretaking for, maybe *they* are the disabled family member, maybe they're timeshifted, maybe they have agoraphobia, maybe they're an expat, maybe they have a small weird hobby or a kink. Understanding their lives can help you understand how to work with them when they struggle.

The same is true for offline people. The 13%. They may have physical challenges but they may also have mental or emotional ones. Lack of energy for learning an all-new thing. Concerns over doing something wrong and wasting money or time. NOT LIKING TO FEEL STUPID. They're looking for more of a welcome mat and less of a "Hey have you tried Ubuntu?" approach.

Seriously "Try Ubuntu..."



So remember Janet, the one who is organizing the square dancing camping spreadsheet? I got this feedback after I tweeted about her. And this guy is... not wrong. But we might also say "not EVEN wrong" because he's got the right solution but for the wrong problem. Which is not unusual in the tech world. But we, librarians, can be compassionate towards him while still not installing Ubuntu on Janet's laptop. Unless her problem to solve is "too much free time and a desire to learn a new operating system in her 80s" in which case go Janet!

Three digital divides



Financial

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Usability

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What is your gender?



Inclusion

People are made to feel unwelcome in online spaces or with UX considerations and then figure "Why bother"?

Empowerment can also be inclusion. Or equity... These are different aspects of a similar issue. Often people, "computer people" to use Phil Agre's parlance, are looking for scalable solutions and they oversimplify the complexities of humanity into something that will fit into a checkbox or a database.

Letting people fill in their own gender, using their own words, for example, is vastly preferable from a human standpoint, but difficult from a database standpoint (or a market research standpoint where your client is telling you "we need this split up by gender" and you're not deputized to explain genderfluidity to them). But how do you explain that to the digitally divided transgender kid who is faced with this choice? And that kid feels 1% or heck maybe 25% less likely to want to engage online because of it.



"The digital divide hurts everyone"

Credit: Garry Knight, on Flickr

I talk a lot about social justice and inequality issues. I try to be tactical as well as truthful. One of the messages I find helpful, tactically, is the idea that many institutionalized issues (poverty, racism, ableism, ageism, homophobia and transphobia) hurt everyone, not just the people who are the "targets" or "victims" of prejudice and intolerance.

Feminism, as a more straightforward example, can make a more pragmatic kind of sense to a wider audience when it's not just a thing for women but a thing for everyone because the idea of the patriarchy—normative gender stereotypes, toxic masculinity, people pressured to fit some societal notion of gender roles—is bad for people of all genders.

So this is my message about the digital divide: It hurts everyone and working on it helps everyone. When you listen to Sady Fisher this afternoon I suspect she'll be talking about more of this sort of equity.



Social model of disability

Credit: Justice Ender on Flickr

And so when I think about removing barriers, sometimes I think about literal ones (if someone can't use a touchpad GIVE THEM A MOUSE) but sometimes the figurative ones.

A construction I find helpful is what is called the Social Model of Disability (links on the linksheet). Which is contrasted to the medical model of disability. That is, this guy's issue is NOT that he is using a wheelchair to get around, that is just a fact about him. This guy's problem is that no one made this walkway accessible in the snow. It's a social problem which needs a societal solution. Not a medical one (where you might say "we need to work towards a society where everyone can walk" which is less-realistic and more obnoxious) (click) and there are positive message approaches you can make, like this one about the NYC MTA. Hey if you put in an elevator, it helps all different kinds of people. This encourages more buy in and decreases the "otherness" of the digitally divided. "You're not bad at computers. Computers are bad at working with you"



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So looking at another social-model angle. Learning tech is like learning to drive. It's a thing most people can do. It's a thing most people do. Some people can't (money, health, access) and there are workarounds for them. Some people won't and those same workarounds will work for them (and it's their choice, not mine). BUT, nearly everyone who makes a choice not to drive understands the social costs of not-driving. (Chris story...) People who are impacted by the medical model of disability, for example, usually know that's happening. The same is not true for people who are digitally divided.

2 Ways to Apply for Disaster Aid

ONLINE



disasterassistance.gov

FEMA APP



fema.gov/mobile-app

They don't know enough about technology to know they are being excluded. The costs of remaining offline are often hidden, or at least they are right up until your town floods and the only way to interact with the government's Federal Emergency Management Agency is through a web page. Awkward. We know this in the library because we frequently see these people struggling.

In the US you can maybe get a social worker to help you apply for food stamps but not so much for completing an online dating profile. It becomes a social issue, people's lack of connectivity, whether it's choice or not a choice. It isolates them.

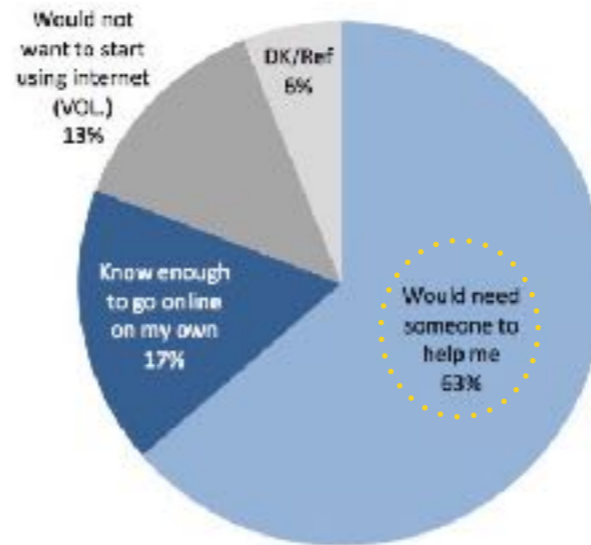
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**A computer is a means to an end.
The person you're helping probably
cares mostly about the end.
This is reasonable.**

Phil Agre

Realistically, you and I view computers as tools. Digitally-divided users view computers as obstacles.

What is needed?



And those obstacles feel like ones they can't scale themselves. Pew looked at offline populations and asked them what they would need to get online? Some didn't care to, some didn't want to, some didn't know (I am having a hard time thinking how that conversation went) but most would need help. They can't get online alone. As the digital divide has been shrinking this piece of the pie gets bigger. They need help, they need our help.



Email is Internet 101. We need to get people to 202, fast.

When I was in library school, my favorite thing was helping people learn technology. I helped people get email accounts using rocketmail and mailexcite in the late nineties. I figured I'd do that for a few years and ... everyone would have email and then we could deal with more sophisticated topics like online privacy or what to do when Equifax gets hacked and loses the data of most of the adults in your country. I laugh at how naive I was. I'm still signing people up for their first email accounts in 2018. But people move at their own pace and you can only try to make their online experiences engaging and positive so they might want to have more of them.

“

Your primary goal is not to solve their problem. Your primary goal is to help them become one notch more capable of solving their problem on their own.

Phil Agre

Because that is what we can work on. I can't make email work much better (though I can show you how to block those annoying ads, make the font bigger and make a distribution list) I can empower. I can include. Help people see themselves. Help them find their people. Because in rural areas especially, or for people who are otherwise isolated from their real-life communities, online spaces and interactions can help people solve problems. And helping people solve their own problems can help them be more socially included, less divided.

Here are a few quick examples.

Problems like...

shopping



So I don't think any of these will be totally novel to you, but I just want to run some of these down. I help someone learn to use a computer every week. Here are tasks I help them with, barriers they may not even know they have, that solve their problems.

People who are offline pay more to buy things (fewer discounts, more difficult comparison shopping), are more at risk when buying things (getting in a car in the winter) and have fewer choices when buying things.

Problems like...

shopping



working



Job applications even for "offline" jobs are often online or require at the least a resume uploaded. "Voc rehab" help people retrain from being loggers or carpenters. Helping them get a job at Home Depot is largely just teaching them how to fill out applications. I'm sure you see these folks in your libraries. Helping people with computers helps them get to work.

Problems like...

shopping



working



meeting people



Dating has moved online. Now if you are primarily an offline person you *might* be looking for an offline person and yet many social and networking opportunities either happen entirely online or are facilitated by the online world—facebook, social media. It's important when we talk about these online engagement opportunities to explain that not only is this happening, much of it is **NORMATIVE** now. Not your thing? Fine. But it's a normal thing. It's important to set that expectation. It helps people be less isolated. "You could solve a problem this way"

Problems like...

shopping



working



meeting people



civics



And as things become normative, expectations of how people are expected to interact with their governments are also normative. When I talk to librarians in Maine, for example, they talk about how one thing that gets digitally divided people motivated to get online is Moose Licenses. Having something appealing and motivating is a lot better than having your first online experience be when your house is underwater.

Problems like...

shopping



working



meeting people



civics



learning



and then we get things that aren't problems necessarily but more like opportunities. There are a ton of ways people can self-directedly learn online from Khan academy or Lynda.com or Universal Class to my favorite local pastime, watching tractor engines running and learning to tune them up. Research is indicating that much more of people's learning will be taking place online.

Problems like...

shopping



working



meeting people



civics



learning



This last one, though, this is where things are going. How many people here have learned a thing by watching YouTube videos? I learned ukulele, I learned how to fix my car's back seat which wasn't folding down, I learned how to put my hair in a bun. Seriously.

Digital readiness



*digital readiness: whether people have the **skills** to use information technology, as well as the **digital literacy tools** to help people determine whether the online information they access is trustworthy.*

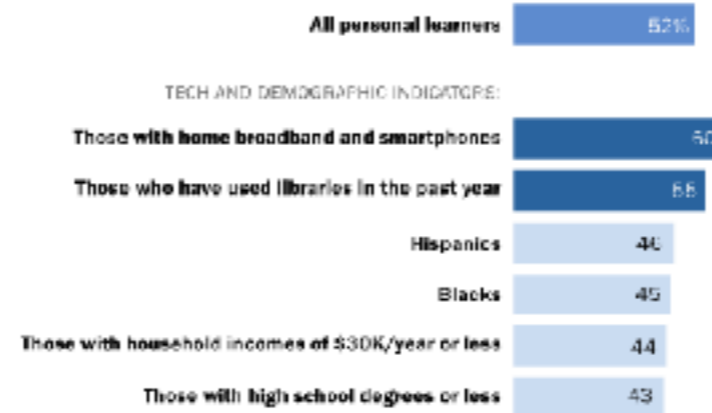
This is important for the last part, what I sometimes call the last divide: the concept of digital readiness. With lots, many, most, learning opportunities shifting to online spaces, people need digital readiness to take advantage of other opportunities. We should understand this issue. People need skills (mouse, vision, reading) as well as trust (trust in their own abilities to discern, trust in themselves not to make mistakes) in order to be comfortable and happy empowered people. And this is tricky in an era of serious bullshit and its no wonder people have trouble with this part.

My job as a librarian in 2018 is to help you be digitally ready, or help other people to be. And this is less about learning to use a mouse and much more about learning to teach yourself the skills you need.

library usage as indicator

Library users and the highly wired are more likely to use the internet in personal learning

% of personal learners who use the internet for learning among ...

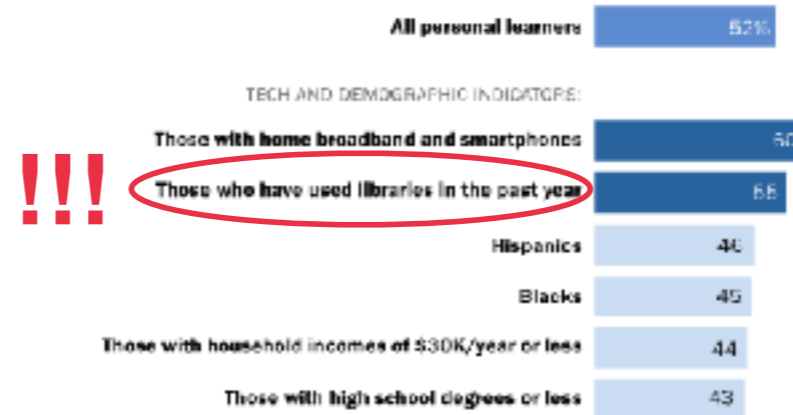


The good news is.... People who are using libraries are people who are already primed to use the internet for learning. We can use this platform to help them use the libraries to learn to trust (or what not to trust)

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The Fate of Online Trust in the Next Decade

Many experts say lack of trust will not be a barrier to increased public reliance on the internet. Those who are hopeful that trust will grow expect technical and regulatory change will combat users' concerns about security and privacy. Those who have doubts about progress say people are inured to risk, addicted to convenience and will not be offered alternatives to online interaction. Some expect the very nature of trust will change.

BY LEE RAINIE AND ANNA ANDERSON



Trust will be strengthened, but it will be blind trust enforced by the ceaseless demands of The System, hell-bent to drive everyone online.

E.BENEZEE BALDWIN BOWLES

Helping people trust, teaching them to trust, in their own skills, in their abilities to discern the real from the fake, the credible from the fraudulent, with us and eventually... without us, is where the next stages of digital divide mitigation is going.

The bad news is, people's trust is shaky, especially lately (and especially in the US)

Everyone is part of it.



WHOLE COMMUNITY UNDERSTANDING OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY ADOPTION IN REMOTE AND RURAL INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

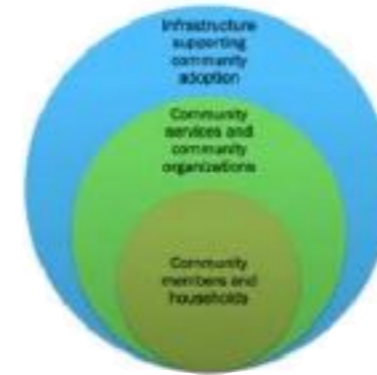


Figure 3. Networked Model of Meaningful Broadband Adoption

And one of the things the research points us to about digital readiness and uptake (and this is true for climbing out of a number of social problems generally, people just out of prison, domestic violence victims, trauma survivors) is that the more supportive their ENTIRE NETWORK is, the better off their ability to get out of their bad situations. Now lack of broadband/connectivity is not necessarily a bad situation like these others, but it does impose structural limitations on connectivity, inclusion and access that we should be, and are, working against.

“

Take a long-term view. Who do users in this community get help from? If you focus on building that person's skills, the skills will diffuse to everyone else.

Phil Agre

Since we stopped being a room full of books (though we are that) we've moved more towards being conduits for different things. Electronic information, skill building, community stewardship. Now we're getting into a more nebulous role of, among other things, incentivizing participation, calming fears, and becoming the trusted source/ally among a ton of people who are just trying to sell you something or who are telling you that you don't belong.



Because there are some barriers I'm not in a position to remove—people who worry about their citizenship status, or who hear their elected leaders talking smack about them, or who have health instability and worry about their future healthcare—but I can, using the social model of the digital divide, explain to them that it's not their fault, that it's tech's job to meet them, and it's their right to ask for better websites, better online experiences, and better treatment.

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In the post-Snowden digital landscape there is an additional element to this skills divide to consider — the divide between those who can navigate the internet free from state and corporate oversight, and those who cannot.

Ian Clark — Journal of Radical Librarianship

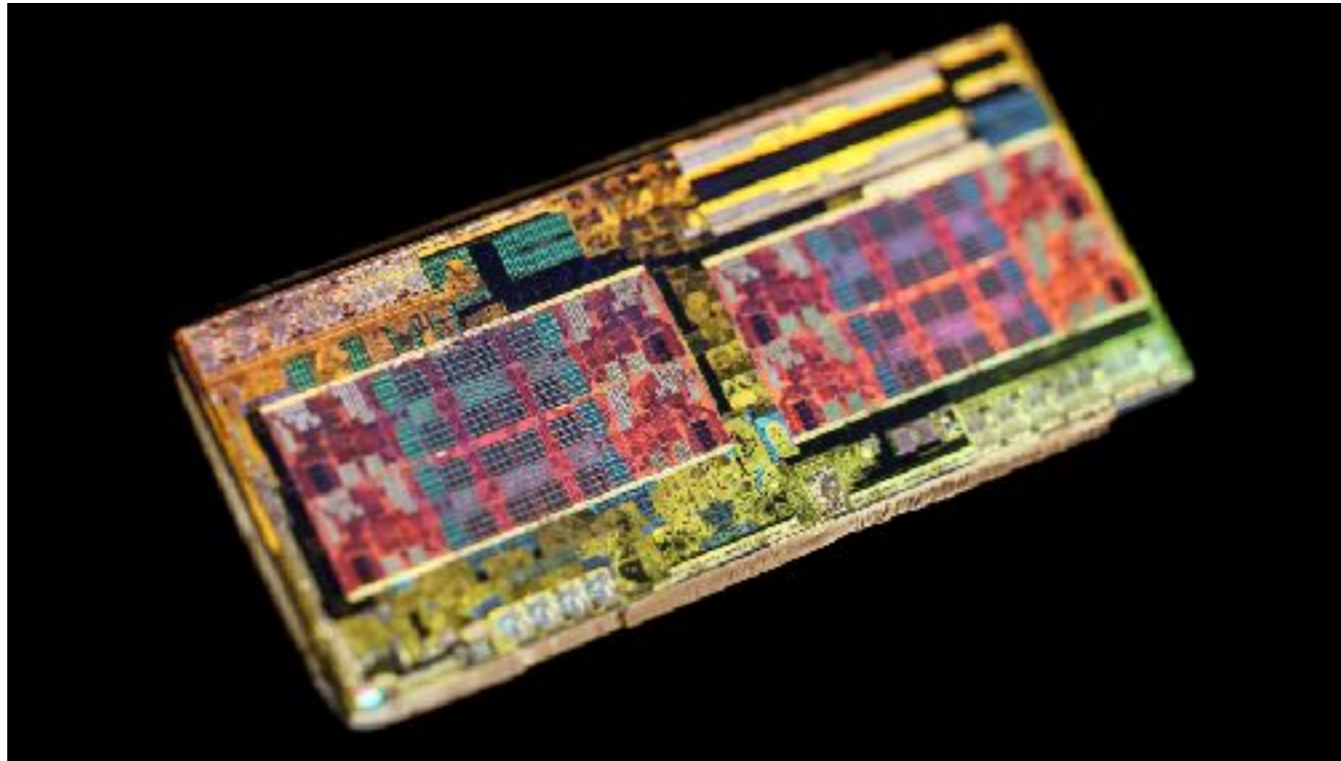
Because the divide, especially now, is pernicious because people who lack savviness within their tech environment are increasingly preyed upon by it. And if we want our patrons, and ourselves, to become fully realized human citizens, we need to give them as many tools as they can handle, to achieve competency and capacity for what comes next.



This is not give a person a fish, though that is part of it (the tech, the broadband).

This is not teach a person to fish, though that is part of it (the skills, the practice).

This is helping someone not be afraid of the water, showing them a good spot where the fish are biting, and guiding them through their first few fishing trips. Maybe asking them how it went afterwards. In a computer way. Digital readiness.



There is beauty in technology, not just in a "hot chips" way but in the way it can bring us together, help us learn, help us become who we wish to be.

“


***Knowledge lives in
communities, not
individuals.***

—
- Phil Agre



As I said earlier, it's not just "Hold the mouse like this" anymore. Those messages have been in the ether since we've had mice (1984). They're important but they're not enough.

We not only give people access to the information they want (and need) but we also improve and strengthen their access to their communities. And that is what helps improve digital readiness and help people become more like ... themselves. The digital divide hurts everyone. And the digital divide isn't people not knowing things, it's a social problem. And libraries not only help society, we ARE society (for better or worse) and we can help break down barriers for the digital divided.



**Thank you!
Stay in touch!**

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