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The digital divide in Latin America: a case study

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Abstract:

In this paper I will try to give a brief overview of what is called by many the “digital or educational divide” that is affecting so many citizens worldwide. I will then focus on what the professionals at the Max von Buch Library, Universidad de San Andrés, have attempted in an effort to overcome this barrier and to offer the kind of academic services the University’s faculty and students needs.

Definition

The “digital divide” (and I would add information divide) has been defined as the deficiency and the impossibility in technological access or ownership (computers, software, connection). A gap, which tends to deepen, is produced between those individuals that can access new information and communication tools such as phones, TV sets or the Internet, and those who are too poor to get them. In other words, it is *the gap between the have's and the have not's*.

To fill this gap at the local (racial, gender, physical, geographic or economic handicap), national or international level does not just mean providing computers to people who need them. It means that we also train them in the use of computers, and most importantly, and here's where we librarians have a role, it means that we teach them how to access information. Access includes not only knowing where to locate information, but also how to understand it, and how to use it wisely. IFLA indicates that in order to fill the information divide it is necessary to create in libraries and information centers an environment that allows for a free and fair access to

information, as well as freedom of expression and participation in the knowledge society (1). We need to understand that the existing gap in information literacy (the information divide) in the different societies that compose our present world is critical for our age.

This is not only a Third World or underdeveloped countries' problem, as many want us to believe. This is a global problem. It is an endemic problem that humanity has been suffering for centuries and is amplified in our "information age", as Castells defines it. It is an information gap between the educated and the uneducated, among different social classes and also globally, between industrialized and less developed countries. What we don't know yet, what we can only guess is the impact it will ultimately have on our society.

We need to understand that one of IFLA's objectives, and it also should be ours, is to understand and apply the concept of lifelong literacy to the society as a whole and to our pressing problems. Let's meditate for a second on United Nations Secretary Kofi Annan's words (2) about the importance of having daily access to news and education: "timely access to news and information can promote trade, education, employment, health and wealth.... Crucial ingredient of democracy"

According to an estimate survey held by NUA Internet Surveys (3), in September 2002 there were 605.5 million people connected to Internet.

Africa	6.31 million
Latin America	33.35 million
Asia/Pacific	187.24 million
Europe	190.91 million
Middle East	5.12 million
Canada/USA	182.67 million

Latin American overview

If we carefully observe some Latin American countries, we can see a marked growth in Internet connection and use in the last years, as NUA Internet Surveys shows in its pages devoted to each country (4).

We will mention just a few examples:

Argentina: from 0.85% (330.000) of the total population in December 1998 to 10,38% (3.88 million) in July 2001

Brazil: from 1.4% (2.35 millions) in December 1998 to 6.84% (11.94 million) in July 2001

Chile: from 1.30% (200.000) in June 1997 to 20.02% (3.1 million) in December 2001

Mexico: from 0.38% (370.000) in November 1997 to 3.36% (3.42 million) in July 2001

Peru: from 0.12% (31.000) in October 1997 to 10.73% (3 million) in December 2001

Uruguay: from 0.27% (9.000) in October 1997 to 13.61% (400.000) in December 2001.

The Yankee Group (5) estimated that by the end of 2003 there would be around 1.2 million subscriptions to ADSL services in Latin America, with Brazil leading the region (61% of subscriptions) and Mexico tripling its own subscriptions from previous years. Meanwhile, in

the cable modem market, the second most used option, Mexico would lead with a 30% increase in subscriptions in the region.

Let's not forget - these are just estimates! Let's not forget that just 10% of the world population is online! (6)

There is a 2003 study by Alvarez and Ibarra (7) on the AmericasPATH (AMPATH) project on network connectivity in Latin America and the Caribbean, aimed at collaborating, bringing together and strengthening ties among research and academic communities from the U.S. and other countries. Since June 2001, AMPATH has connected four national education and research networks:

REACCIUN in Venezuela
Retina in Argentina,
REUNA in Chile and
RNP in Brazil.

They are also working on the connectivity of academic networks for Colombia, Panama, Peru, and the Virgin Islands (US).

According to their report, there were great disparities between the bandwidth available from abroad and the actual use made by the academic community in the countries studied, due to a bottleneck in the countries themselves. Therefore, researchers have not enough access to maintain a fluid communication with their colleagues in other countries.

Argentina and the case of Biblioteca Max von Buch

We all know and understand that scientific and academic research is and must be collaborative among institutions and countries. Our researchers need to obtain adequate and timely information for their research projects. We librarians understand, as well as they do, that the value of information is measured in terms of quality, quantity, and the speed at which we acquire and adapt to it.

Libraries and librarians have the tools to diminish the information divide in our countries. According to the American Library Association, public, school, and academic libraries are the ones that presently have the structure and programs needed to attempt solving certain aspects of the divide already existing in our communities.

But we must face some problems:

1. Big corporations regard information as a “commodity”, thus the access to certain kinds of information is restricted and out of the reach for the public, unlike printed books on our libraries’ shelves. For this kind of information you must pay, and this means the information divide widens again,
2. Most information is in English, being the prevalent language on the Internet (8),
3. Content of most websites is provided by the U.S. and European countries.

Argentine academic libraries have become aware of the obstacles they have to face, both at the individual and the national level. We know that our researchers are pressed to publish and

that they must and want to do it in refereed international journals. To do so, they need to have access to research published by their peers in the main countries of the world. They want their research work to appear in well-known academic publications; that's why many times they end up relinquishing their intellectual property rights at the hands of commercial companies, and this leads to the problem, we deal with today, which is the excessively high prices of several academic publications.

One of the duties of an academic library is to make sure that the collections it builds are accessible to its immediate and future patrons. The advent of Internet brought a change in the concept of “collection development” in the academic library. Today we must make decisions about whether to physically own materials or acquire them in electronic format, and therefore renounce ownership. In other words, we have to choose between access to information vs. ownership.

The Biblioteca Max von Buch had to face this situation in an early stage of its development. It took certain steps at that time that could have been considered risky, because they weren't in line with the actions of other academic libraries in the country. The library opened up its mind to the world: it looked, observed, studied, analyzed, and made the decisions it thought would most benefit its present and future users. The library made a conscious decision not stay isolated from world trends. The Library director and staff agreed that there was an opportunity for and decided to seize the opportunity to embark in a new direction.

The library's mission, similar to that of any university library, is to serve researchers, professors, undergraduate and graduate students, by “giving access to information resources”(9), thus contributing to students' education, as well as “promoting academic research”. Having this mission in mind, and taking into consideration the existing budgetary restrictions for developing a collection that would provide the academic background needed for research and teaching, a courageous decision was made to reassign an important portion of the budget available to enter the world of intangible information, of cooperation, of virtual consortia; in other words, the world of hybrid libraries.

But what does it mean to have access to information for an academic institution such as the Universidad de San Andrés, where the pressure to publish is very strong for its researchers, where many classes are taught in English, and a good percentage of the bibliography used in courses is also in English? It means to have access to information without geographic constraints; it means the possibility of obtaining information 24 hours a day, either from campus or from home. For the library it is the right thing to do in order to fulfil its mission, and it's easier said than done.

To achieve these goals was a hard task for the librarians, and it implied going a long, long way. Without basic power infrastructure, access to Retina academic network, or an adequate building to house the needed hardware and software, this wouldn't have been possible. At the same time equipment, connectivity, and the information products selected would have been useless without a trained library staff. Training meant acknowledging the need for international standards and its immediate application; it meant keeping current with new academic and library trends in the country and abroad; it meant understanding and foreseeing the needs of present and future patrons. Only then was it possible to share original resources

with different academic and public libraries throughout the world by joining the OCLC consortium (10). The library developed one of the first web pages in the country, aimed at patrons as well as fellow librarians or other external visitors. It was at this point, when the library showed that it was mature, trustworthy, and efficient, that it could enter and actively participate in projects such as LAMP (11), LAPTOC (12), or HAPI (13), or integrate PAIS' (14) advising committee. The library lacked a retrospective serials collection, due to its short life; it was thanks to its perseverance in dealing with document services providers, that it got access to academic databases such as JSTOR, Project Muse or EbscoHost. Having access to such resources made researchers and students alike feel they were not marginalized; at the same time, the library created a program of bibliographic instruction, a basic tool for improving the use of such virtual resources.

Conclusion:

I understand that cooperation among our institutions, both at the national and the international level, is of the utmost importance for trying to overcome the barriers to information access, and thus reduce the educational and information divide within each country. But we must not forget that there are certain basic, essential requirements –economical, social, political, and cultural- that must be taken into account to gain access to information.

I believe the Biblioteca Max von Buch's case is a clear example of what can be achieved with creativity, tenacity, training, and boldness, in spite of meagre resources. The Biblioteca Max von Buch could participate and be part of local and international undertakings, thus minimizing the information divide for its patrons. I hope others can follow its example. Feel free to contact its staff which is always eager to help and provide information to colleagues from Argentina and from around world.

Notes:

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9. OCLC: Online Computer Library Center
10. LAMP: Latin American Microform Project
11. LAPTOC: Latin American Periodicals Tables of Contents
12. HAPI: Hispanic American Periodicals Index

13. PAIS: Public Affairs Information Centers

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