Palaces for the People’s Digital Literacy Skills:
How to Invest in the Education of Citizens

[Introduction: A Social Divide]

The digital divide at its heart is a social divide. The two share many of the same fault lines. If we look just at the digital divide’s technological face, we see that “computer use is related to race and ethnicity, educational attainment, gender, basic household composition, and, most dramatically, income.” (Bishop, et al., 1999, page 363). Public libraries, as part of its esprit de corps, are already doing much to help connect disadvantaged groups to the infosphere, including providing information that is health-related and life-saving. (Cabello and Butler, 2017) In the absence of a universal basic income and a strong education system in the US and UK, libraries are taking the lead.

The aim of librarians is not to eradicate the digital divide but to mitigate its effects, (Van Dijk, 2020) and to give libraries the tools to do so. This essay will explore reasons for the digital divide in the US and the UK and consider approaches to remedy it. Like most research, there are many instances here supporting correlation over causation. What emerges again and again in the research are the fault lines aforementioned. From this list of factors, we will pay particular attention to age as a guide post in the digital divide and look at how resources, or lack thereof, play a role in the digital divide.

One can have many digital advantages but still be informationally poor or at least have informationally poor blindspots. Recent examples of this include individuals who were targeted and swayed by misleading advertising campaigns on social media that marked the 2016 presidential elections and the Brexit vote. This is a result of a murky “information horizon” or the resources one uses within a temporal information-seeking context (Yu, 2010). Even one untrustworthy source has the power to ricochet off and around one’s social media echo chamber. These dodgy sources do not exist by accident; many bad actors are at play. As one professor noted at City, University London: There is a dark digital underbelly that is connecting us all. (Dunne-Howrie, 2020)

Librarians would be wise to understand where a patron may fall on the digital divide:
Van Dijk in his book *The Digital Divide* separates the levels of engagement with periods of time as noted in the graph above. The dates may seem arbitrary but are worth noting. (2020, pages 14-20). In 2012, 45% of the American public owned a smartphone, up from 35% just 16 months prior. (Rainie, 2016)

Referring to the digital divide graph above, we can assume that different demographics fall on the digital divide in different ways. Senior citizens and the unhoused, for instance, may feel the effects of missing out on all three levels of digital benefits: lack of access, lack of skills, and lack of positive outcomes. There are those, too, like the informationally poor who are hindered in their information practices which are “limited in range and variety, largely performed involuntarily while engaging in non-information practices” … and using devices “involving simple skills and superficial information practices.” (Yu, L., 2010, page 929) This cohort may have the digital tools at their disposal but still suffer from a 2nd and 3rd level information divide. Mastering *Angry Birds* does not equal navigating *Microsoft Word*.

The following passages cover remedies in which to mitigate the effects of the digital divide, at all of three of the levels that Van Dijk illustrates.

**Instilling Intellectual Curiosity**

This first issue is where the digital divide and the social divide most closely align. Education, I believe, is THE best remedy to close performance gaps but first we must instill our young students with intellectual curiosity. For society, the goal is to build a robust network of early education programs which would help all our kids. Politically and culturally, these “Mommy” issues like early childhood education and work/life balance are making it into public policy in some American states¹ but they are too often overshadowed by “Daddy” issues like crime, criminal justice, and terrorism.

The trend, however, for early education interventions is clear. Parker, Diffey, and Atchison, in 2018, found that “In the last five years — amid research that points to the long-lasting, positive effects that quality pre-kindergarten programs provide — states have increased funding for these opportunities by 47 percent. In 2016-17, all but six states contributed to pre-K programs, and nationally, nearly 1.5 million children now participate.” (page 2)

Cities have increased access where state-level funding falls short. More than half of the nation’s largest cities have some form of Universal Pre-K. (Franchino, 2019) Five gold medals

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1 *Universal Pre-K* is the law in 3 jurisdictions: Vermont, Florida, and Washington, D.C. An additional 7 states are praised for having *near-universal Pre-K* according to a February 2018 research report. (Parker, E., Diffey, L., Atchison, B., 2018)
were given to the following cities for outstanding performance: Boston, Charlotte, Nashville, New York City, and San Antonio. (Franchino, 2019) Still, access and quality for pre-Kindergarten across the U.S. is disturbingly uneven for a program with such unanimously positive benefits.

Scholastic programs can be a rich source of what Karen Fisher calls “Information Grounds” and can be an antidote to Elena Chatman’s brilliant but claustrophobic information behaviour theory, “Small Worlds”. Marginalized groups, as Chatman has studied, often have a suspicion towards outside experts and would rather rely on the advice of people inside their “Small Worlds” or peer group. (Burnett and Jaeger, 2008) This can have a devastating effect on children whose parents are illiterate or who do not believe in science. Luckily, there is another version of “Small Worlds” that can be found in the classroom. While Chatman’s information behaviour theory seems to have negative, stifling connotations, “Small worlds”, in fact, exist at all levels of culture, even within academic circles. (Burnett and Jaeger, 2008) Therefore a child is not only exposed to the “Small World” of a family life whose idea of leisure time does not include reading. Teachers, on the other hand, have their own standards and incentives; like academic hummingbirds, teachers are constantly conferring with each other about best practices and book recommendations. Educators also freely give tips to students on how to access resources in a school library or public library.

Reading and literacy at a young age is THE most important thing in a child’s life and, I would argue, THE main antidote to becoming digitally disadvantaged. There are, of course, more pedestrian reasons for strong and early literacy interventions. Having the capacity to navigate documents like “job application forms, manuals, maps, menus, labels on food and advertising,” will all benefit children as they come of age. (Ray, 2007) Research has shown the myriad benefits of early childhood education boost not only the child’s intellect and well-being but also the functioning of society as a whole\(^2\). (Franchino, 2019) More directly, children who have had pre-K experience end up reading at an earlier stage and at a higher level than their peers. (Franchino, 2019)

Children with parents who are not avid readers are still less likely to develop the motivating curiosity to read. (Shapiro, 2014) The love of literature, which would be a source of pleasure throughout their lives, will elude them. Instilling a love of literature is not only good for health, literacy, educational performance, and future job prospects but it can also help cement a parent-child bond as was the case for best-selling author, Susan Orlean:

Even when I was in my last year of high school and could drive myself to the library, my mother and I still went together now and then, and the trip unfolded exactly as it did when I was a child, with all the same beats and pauses and comments and reveries, the same perfect pensive rhythm we followed so many times before. (2018, page 8)

\(^2\) A favorite example of mine is the nation of Finland, ranked the happiest country on Earth as well as the one who has the best educational system. (Kilduff, 2019) Finland ranks high across a number of rankings: one important correlation is that more than 50%(!) of Finnish citizens have visited a library in the past month. (Kilduff, 2019)
Children need extra attention if we want to live in a strong democracy. They really are the key to a safe and prosperous future. Another group in our study, however, wields a disproportionate amount of power at the ballot box, and has the ability to mold future policies.

Marketing Campaigns for Senior Citizens

Senior citizens are often considered the cohort least-skilled in digital capabilities. They are often confined by their own “Small Worlds” coupled with dwindling social expectations. Klinenberg writes:

As of 2016, more than twelve million Americans aged sixty-five and above live by themselves, and the ranks of those who are aging alone is growing steadily in much of the world. Although most people in this situation are socially active, the risk of isolation is formidable … In neighborhoods where crime is high or the social infrastructure is depleted, old people are more likely to stay home, alone, simply because they lack compelling places to go. (2018, Loc 478-483)

Furthermore, a resistance against intellectual curiosity often accompanies old age. Elderly people often stick to repetitive tasks that require no cognitive courage, which can further lead to a sense of futility, purposelessness, and isolation. (Delello and McWhorter, 2017)

Research shows that with enough patience and the right incentives, senior citizens can bridge the digital divide. Libraries, for years, have been busy encouraging seniors to access services including surprising ways like designing competitions in Xbox bowling (Klinenberg, 2018). Much attention has been placed on the well-being of senior citizens as we move into the 21st century. There are several reasons for this. Humanity, in general, is becoming a lot more conscientious and compassionate across a range of issues (Pinker, 2012): elderly well-being, animal rights, indigenous rights, GLBT rights, environmental welfare, health disparities, #BlackLivesMatter, and the so-called loneliness epidemic. We will return to the last point briefly.

The 65+ demographic is also critical because it has been well documented that senior citizens in the US vote at much higher rates than their fellow citizens in democratic elections. (Noah, 2019) Additionally, every member of one of the largest and most outspoken cohorts (the Baby Boomer Generation) will have turned 65 or older by 2030. (Noah, 2019) There has been a natural, perhaps an overt, response of listening to our elders and crafting public policy to their benefit, especially when we consider that some of the top political leaders in both nations have an average age of 70. (Noah, 2019)

There are various public library services in the UK and the US that strive to provide the elderly with digital literacy. One set of researchers found that elderly people are able to figure out Ipad technology when shown the outcome of connecting with friends and family. (Delello and McWhorter, 2017) Technology and social media can be a useful tool if the elderly can converse with grandchildren on the screen or look up old classmates, friends, or lovers.

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3 A September 3rd, 2019 article in *Politico* found that the average age of the top 3 presidential candidates was 77(!). Other prominent figures: Nancy Pelosi, the House Leader, 79; and Mitch McConnell, Majority Leader in the Senate, 77. The UK has a wider range. As of May 2, 2020: recent prime minister, Theresa May, is age 63; Jeremy Corbyn, recent leader of the Labour Party, age 70; Queen Elizabeth II, age 94.
Ancestry.com proved a popular destination as well. Researchers admit, however, that subjects in their iPad survey were economically prosperous. This in turn likely skewed the findings. (Delello and McWhorter, 2017)

San Francisco Public Library has a comprehensive list of services for its elderly patrons. This includes an exhaustive collection of large print books as well as a number of audio books. SFPL also has a Library on Wheels and Home Library Services for the disabled and the elderly. This entails bringing books to the patrons via mail or van service. There are also resources on-line to point seniors to government and legal spheres, health spheres, and social spheres. (SFPL, 2020)

On the ground level, libraries in London go even further: offering a number of introductory programs to help the elderly bridge the digital divide. Alan Wylie, a public library advocate and current librarian at Islington’s Finsbury Library provided some insight at a recent lecture at City, University London. Islington borough provides 6 free thirty-minute digital skills workshops that any member of Islington’s library is welcome to take. (Wylie, 2020) Another disadvantage on both the social and the digital level is a geographic one or what critics call the postcode lottery. While Islington may have comprehensive library programs for the elderly and for its citizens, other boroughs during the austerity years have made drastic cuts, specifically Camden and Lewisham.

Two of library history’s most important benefactors made sure that the postcode lottery would not hinder access to knowledge. In fact, their aims were to flatten inequalities and help bridge the educational and literary divide. One of these men, too, was instrumental in bridging the digital divide.

The Search for the Next Andrew Carnegie

Private/Public partnerships are not a novel concept in library investment. This is the world we’ve been living in since the Gilded Age of the late 19th century. The most famous example is railroad magnate, Andrew Carnegie, who spent vast sums of private wealth to erect public libraries across the world at the turn of the 20th century. (Zhulina, 2018) Andrew Carnegie’s money helped build more than two thousand libraries just across the United States and 108 libraries to American colleges and universities. (Cohen, 2000) This is in addition to “his” hundreds more built across the world, primarily in the Anglosphere. Microsoft founder, Bill Gates, at the turn of the 21st century, was also an instrumental donor to the cause of new library construction as he was the primary private contributor to the 2004 Seattle Public Library. (Kilduff, 2019) Gates, however, is more widely known for his digital efforts in public libraries. With the economy in freefall in 2020, the library sector could use a few more heroes, even if their motives are mixed.

In some quarters, there was an outcry against (what we would now call) Carnegie’s neoliberal reflexes; it seemed he only built middle-class shrines “to help those who would help

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4 It should be noted that the Finsbury branch of Islington Public Libraries will give a library card to anyone. In other local situations, one must live in the borough in order to borrow books.

5 Several numbers are given for the total number of Carnegie libraries. The reason for the discrepancy is that more than a few communities made the tragic mistake of demolishing their Carnegie libraries, adding to the confusion around the tally.
themselves.” (Cohen, 2000, page 391). Many critics were resistant to his overtures in the library sector, calling Carnegie’s gifts “paternalistic, sexist, and classist.” (Cohen, 2000, page 391) Carnegie, though, had a genuine fondness for reading and wished to share that opportunity with the world.

San Francisco has a handful of Carnegie libraries. This one in the Richmond neighborhood was the first Carnegie funded library in the city, erected in 1914. (Kitlinski-Hong, 2019) Carnegie libraries were built at a time of architectural flowering. The Richmond branch has a Classical Revival style. (photo courtesy: Eric E Castro)

Regarding his philanthropy, the tycoon received a lot of backlash during his own time. Today, in contrast, we are much more grateful for his generous interest in libraries. [I wonder if this is partly because the developed world is much more receptive to private money and that we also behold the Carnegie libraries still standing as architectural treasures.] Carnegie did raise some eyebrows in 1889 when he published “The Gospel of Wealth”, an essay that endorses a muscular philanthropy along with hints of social darwinism. Zhulina, for one, called the efforts of men like Carnegie and Rockefeller “a cultural weapon in promoting the values of unbridled capitalism.” (2018, page 51) His writing seemed to find its audience, even a century later. Warren Buffet, for one, was so inspired by Carnegie’s essay that he claimed it was the inspiration for The Giving Pledge, a promise by a small group of contemporary billionaires to give away half of their fortune to public and private causes. (The Giving Pledge, 2020) (Zhulina, 2018)

Private money is often used to kickstart the building of a library. The municipality then starts managing it by collecting taxes to maintain operations, as Carnegie’s money had done. (Orlean, 2018). In the delectable non-fiction account, The Library Book, best-selling Susan Orlean writes:
Towns and cities began lobbying to get Carnegie funding, and the process of applying had the effect of rallying interest and support for public libraries. Carnegie ended up building nearly 1,700 libraries in 1,400 communities. He funded six small libraries in Los Angeles, which were added to the main system as branches. (2018, page 131)

Just down the street from the Richmond branch pictured above is the Presidio Branch of the San Francisco Public Library, another of the six Carnegie libraries in the city. This one has an Italian Renaissance style of design and architecture. (Kitlinski-Hong, J., 2019) (photo courtesy: Eric E Castro)

The leading philanthrocapitalist who has taken the baton from Andrew Carnegie is Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft but there are several differences to be noted. The first is that Carnegie gave far and wide, often to municipalities that were smaller as well as to major cities. In terms of academic library construction, Carnegie often chose smaller, regional schools which he referred to as “freshwater” colleges rather than to the Ivy leagues. (Cohen, 2000) Gates, on the other hand, gifted a whopping twenty million dollars to the brand new, sexy, flagship library in his hometown: the 2004 Seattle Public Library. (Kilduff, 2019)

In terms of digital efforts, Gates was much more democratic and universal. In 1997, The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation announced it would be connecting libraries and schools around the country with the internet and supplying them with desktop computers. (Miller, 2014) The multi-year initiative was a great success. The foundation, in 2014, announced to everyone’s surprise that they were stepping back from their library philanthropy over a period of three to five years, presumably because their goals had been met. Talk of closing the digital divide was popular in the year 2000 when the Gates Foundation said that they passed the halfway point of
providing free public access to the internet in over 11,000 underserved public libraries in low-income communities in Canada and the U.S. (Gates Foundation, 2000).

The University of Washington acted as a third party in tracking the foundation’s U.S. Libraries program. They found:

... positive effects for libraries and their patrons, many of whom had little or no prior computerized access to information. Students and low-income residents were the heaviest users of the new computers. For more than half of the unemployed users who used the library as a resource while looking for work, the library computers were their only source of access. The study also tracked a positive shift in staff morale in libraries that had received computers and training, as well as increased library traffic. (Gates Foundation, 2000)

The demand for these free computers is breathtaking. In his survey of the New Lots branch of the Brooklyn Public Library, Klinenberg (2018, Loc. 458) found “The library is small, and it’s already crowded despite the early hour and the good weather. There are two banks of computer terminals with Internet access on the first floor, and patrons, sometimes more than one, at every machine.” All aspects of this library, and most others like it across the country, are busy and heavily-used but the free computers are the amenities most attractive.

For other patrons, it is the free internet access that is the draw. Working professionals and college students are likely to possess their own laptops. But, as Susan Orlean discovered in her endlessly-entertaining survey of the Los Angeles Public Library, *The Library Book* (page 289):

...they are always looking for pleasant places to work outside their homes. Many end up in coffee shops and hotel lobbies or join the booming business of coworking spaces. Some of them are also discovering that libraries are society’s original coworking spaces and have the distinct advantage of being free.

While Andrew Carnegie bestowed a legacy of thousands of beautiful library buildings across the U.S. and across the Anglosphere, Bill Gates has very much done the same in terms of a digital and technological infrastructure within those public libraries. Both should be commended.

It all feels like money well-spent and has the added advantage of boosting everyone’s morale. The question is: Who will be our next benefactor? What issues will be important to them? What legacy will they leave us?

**Conclusion**

The digital/social divide emerges in various groups in various ways. Mitigating the effects of the digital divide is not choosing one remedy over another but moving forward with a string of proven strategies. Referring back to the graph I created from Van Dijk’s ideas, society for the
most part is swimming around the 3rd level 'Outcomes' of the digital divide. In this sense, research shows that groups and individuals who are more savvy with digital applications do better over the long run. Delivering services to the very old who vote in higher numbers, and to the very young whose educational habits are just forming, are of high priority. Attention also needs to be placed on groups such as the unhoused, those with low incomes, and those with low levels of educational attainment. Democracy operates best on an even playing field, only then will the forces of resentment and revenge be marginal instead of assumed. Prosperous individuals can also leave behind an important legacy to increase literacy and opportunity for all. A digital divide acts like a social divide but there are many ways to mitigate the effects of both with confidence.
Bibliography


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