Role of Public Libraries in Bridging the Digital Divide

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the role of public libraries in bridging the digital divide in Delta State. It calls for the adoption of appropriate infrastructure and other innovative measures like introduction of appropriate computer related programmes in schools, encouraging citizenry to pick up carrier in the area of science and technology, embarking on enlightenment and awareness programmes and setting up regional/local information resource centers by government especially through the use of the internet also, the challenges of digital divide was revealed. The work concludes that unless appropriate measures are taken in Delta State and Nigeria generally they will be relegated to the background in this knowledge age.

Keywords: Bridging, Delta State, Digital Divide, IT Infrastructure, Public Libraries

INTRODUCTION

The United National Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2000) defined the digital divide as a phenomenon that results from the unequal application of, and access to, information and communication technologies leading to a global knowledge gap between information ‘haves’ and have-nots. This dichotomy threatens to create an underclass of inform poor who risk further marginalization in societies where computer skills open the doors to economic success and personal advancement, entry to good careers and education opportunities, full access to social networks and opportunities for civic engagement (Norris, 2000). Public libraries offer three essential ingredients needed to ensure benefits in the digital era. Infrastructure, content and access (Newman, 2004). In the digital information age people who don’t have access to the internet and World Wide Web through the application of information and communication technologies (ICTs) are increasingly disadvantaged in their access to information (Culler, 2003).

Digital divide can be seen as the growing gap between those parts of the world which have easy access to knowledge, information, ideas and works of information through technology and those who do not (Deschamps, 2001). In the same vein, Salina (2003) sees digital divide as that disparity between individual and or communities who can use electronic information and communication tools, such as the internet, to better the quality of their lives and those who cannot.

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Initially the ‘divide’ referred to the gap that was forming between the richer and the poorer sections of society. However, some people were talking about the digital divide as a complex and dynamic phenomenon while some denied the existence of a digital divide, others claimed that it would disappear on its own (Dijk & Harken, 2003). According to World Bank (2002) quoted in Ani, Uchendu, and Astseye (2007) in its report contend that, in the rapidly evolving electronic environment, developing countries face opportunity cost if they delay greater access to and use of information technology (IT), which together make up ICT. According to the report, ICT is the key for economic development and growth; it offers opportunities for global integration while retaining the identity of traditional societies. ICTs can also increase the economic and social being of poor people, empower individuals and communities, and enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the public sector. However, in Nigeria, there is disparity in the level of accessibility to ICT, between the private and public sectors of the economy (Ani, Uchendu, & Astseye, 2007). This present study is therefore and attempt to investigate and examine the role of public libraries in bridging the digital divide in Delta State.

**Research Questions**

This study sought answers to the following questions:

1. What is the level of awareness of the concept of digital divide in public libraries?
2. What are the causes of digital divide?
3. What is the role of public libraries in bridging the digital divide?
4. What are the infrastructures for bridging the digital divide?
5. What are the challenges faces by public libraries in bridging the digital divide?

**Background**

**Causes of Digital Divide**

Mutala (2002), Singh (2004), Cullen (2001), Kenny (2004), and Salina (2003) identified the following factors that contribute to digital divide:

- **Gender**: It was found that fewer males have limited access to the internet than females. This disparity is partly attributed to perception that it is a technical subject for men, with many females consequently shying away from it.
- **Physical disability**: The internet is inaccessible to the blind and visually impaired used, because the screen reader is unable to read the graphically based web page.
- **Physical access**: The main barriers under this point are lack of telecommunication infrastructure with insufficient reliable bandwidth for internet connections and costs.
- **Lack of ICT skills and support**: People in many disadvantaged groups are often excluded from making use of ICT’S because of low levels of computer and technology skills and also very importantly literacy skills. This is a significant factor in preventing certain people from using the internet technology.
- **Attitudinal factors**: This is derived from cultural and behavioral attitudes towards technology e.g., that computers are for “brainy” people for males for young people, and difficult to user or belong to a middle class “white” culture. Attitudinal factors can also be culturally-based.
- **Relevant content**: One of the reasons why some people do not use internet technologies is because the content is not relevant and interesting to them. This may apply to specific group such as elderly or ethnic gap.
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