

EQUITY OF ACCESS AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

The rapid growth of electronic technology as a means of accessing information has led to increased concern over differences in access to information for various social, economic and ethnic groups. Without adequate access to the technologies that enable a user to gather and use information, citizens become less informed and our democracy suffers. Libraries are a primary resource for gaining access to information available in both print and electronic formats. This commitment is emphasized in American Library Association (ALA) documents, such as the [Library Bill of Rights](#), "[Libraries: An American Value](#)," and "[Access to Electronic Information, Services and Networks](#)."

The Digital Divide

The concept of the digital divide has been used to highlight differences in electronic access to information based on economics, race, ethnic or social group and/or geographic location. ALA has focused much attention on this issue. For example, in 2001 ALA participated in a cooperative venture to help close the digital divide for children and teenagers using public service announcements and creating a help desk to assist Internet users - see "[ALA Joins National Campaign to Close Digital Divide](#)."

In the document "[Principles for the Networked World](#)," ALA further committed itself to equitable access and the elimination of the digital divide. This document focused on numerous issues including privacy, equitable access, access to content, and other issues. Equitable access is defined as "user-centered, barrier-free, and format-independent access to information."

One of the major barriers to access is economic. Populations residing in poor areas or in households of low income may be unable to gain access to information because of the inability to purchase the required equipment, Internet provider service or other necessary resources. This places a special responsibility on libraries to provide access for these communities. It is the position of the library community that such economic impediments be minimized.

In "[Economic Barriers to Information Access](#)," ALA has emphasized its commitment to fulfilling, within economic realities, this important commitment. Specifically, it states that "All library policies and procedures, particularly those involving fines, fees, or other user charges, should be scrutinized for potential barriers to access. All services should be designed and implemented with care, so as not to infringe on or interfere with the provision or delivery of information and resources for all users. Services should be reevaluated regularly to ensure that the library's basic mission remains uncompromised."

Libraries bear a special responsibility to ensure that the public has access to computers, the Internet, and other networked resources to allow all segments of society to participate in the information revolution.

Net Neutrality

Even with libraries offering Internet access to the public, that access will be diminished without the practice of "net neutrality" by Internet service providers. Net (or network) neutrality means that these providers offer the same quality of service to all users. Unfortunately, some providers want to be able to control who gets faster service, based on what they can pay. When the FCC instituted

rules in 2015 to ensure an open Internet, supporters of intellectual freedom were encouraged. However, under a new administration in 2017 these rules are in jeopardy. Net neutrality is a complex and contentious issue that needs to be closely watched by those concerned about the fair distribution of online information and service.

Service to Special Populations

ALA and the Maryland Library Association (MLA) have a long-standing commitment to serving the needs of people that are physically or psychologically challenged, the elderly and the incarcerated. This requires that libraries make a serious commitment of staff and resources to provide equipment, services and staff to members of these communities. For an overview of many of the issues one should consider when serving such populations, visit the Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies (ASCLA/ALA) web site [Libraries Serving Special Populations Section](#).

An excellent source for general issues one should consider when dealing with people with disabilities is ASLCLA's tips sheets on "Library Accessibility: What You Need to Know." Maryland resources include the "[Maryland State Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped](#)" and the "[Maryland Technology Assistance Program](#)."

The governing principle behind all of these documents is clear, that the library community is responsible for providing access to the same quality and quantity of information to all communities.

All library staff must remember that the library community has a special responsibility to assure access to resources and information to every socioeconomic group. To many, libraries are the resource of first and last resort for such access. This is a tradition and a history of which we can be proud.



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INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM MANUAL ~ 7

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