

Institute of Museum and Library Services Field Hearing
“LIBRARIES AND BROADBAND: GROWING NEEDS IN AN ERA OF
RISING DIGITAL EXPECTATIONS”

Testimony of John B. Horrigan, PhD.

April 17, 2014

In 21st Century, libraries fill two important roles in a society in which the delivery of more and more goods and services depend on the Internet. I want to touch on them today in making the case that investments in additional bandwidth to libraries are critically important to helping *all* Americans have a chance to translate digital abundance into tools that can open doors to opportunity.

I. Digital Skills & Digital Readiness

First, libraries serve a critical role in providing a place where people can improve the level of their digital skills. And the need to help people improve their digital skills is important – and often overlooked today in mainstream discourse. Our digital culture tends to assume that once early adopting elites have had time to embrace the latest innovation, everyone else will “get it” and seamlessly embrace it too.

Yet there is ample evidence of wide variation in the levels of digital skills in the general population. A 2009 Federal Communications Commission survey done in connection with the National Broadband Plan found that 29% of broadband users rated low on digital skills. These “low skill” broadband users were approximately 25% less engaged in using the Internet, as measured by the number of online activities they did.

More recent research I have done – whose release is forthcoming – finds (based on a 2013 survey) variation in digital skills even among people who are highly connected to digital tools. Let’s start with those with advanced Internet access, that is, the 80% of Americans either with a home broadband connection or a smartphone. Among those with advanced Internet access, nearly one-fifth (or 18%) has low levels of digital skills. And low levels of digital skills tracks closely with low levels of online activity – particularly in consequential areas such as looking for work or going to a government website. It is worth noting that, when taking all Americans into account (not just those with advanced Internet access), 29% of adults have low levels of digital skills.

	Low Digital Skills (18% of advanced users)	Medium Digital Skills (46% of advanced users)	High Digital Skills (36% of advanced users)
Visit a state or federal government website	62%	79%	89%

The Internet was “very” or “somewhat” important to job search	16%	40%	54%
Used the Internet during most recent job search	10%	38%	52%
Take a class online	2%	17%	26%
Source: John B. Horrigan, “Digital Readiness: Nearly one-third of Americans lack skills to use next-generation ‘Internet of Thing’ applications.” Forthcoming analysis of 2013 national survey of Americans.			

These differences in online use are important because, for the most part, it is the expectation in society that everyone has online access at home with broadband connections. A recent survey I conducted of new Comcast Internet Essentials customers – low-income families with school age children eligible for free or reduced-priced school lunches – shows this.

- 83% of respondents said their child’s school expected that they had Internet access at home.
- 65% said banks and other financial institutions expected that they had Internet access at home.
- 53% said health insurance companies expected that they had Internet access at home.
- 50% said government agencies expected that they had Internet access at home.

Two things are going on: more institutions expect people to be online and many Americans have insufficient levels of digital skills.

This means we must begin to look at digital equity differently. Stakeholders often view digital skills as an issue that effects only the disconnected – people on the wrong side of the digital divide. But, as I’ve shown, many people – about one-fifth of people with advance online access – have insufficient levels of digital skills. This means they lack “digital readiness” – a term that captures that the scope of the challenge in having all segments of society ready for next-generation innovation in information and communication technologies.

Access and Information

The leads to the second big point for libraries – they are in the vanguard of the forces we bring to bear to bolster digital readiness. They are both access points for people without broadband at home and information resources people with service. Again, expectations enter the picture. On any number of occasions I’ve encountered decision-makers who simply assume that home broadband subscriptions are nearly universal in the United States. That is not so. Pew Research Center data from 2013 show that 70% of Americans have broadband at home.³ That translates into about 34 million households without broadband or 90 million people. About half of these people are Internet users – they just don’t have high-speed service at home. They might have access in a number of different ways:

- Dial-up Internet connections
- Smartphones (that is, they have no online service at home but use the Internet on their smartphone)
- They use the Internet from someplace else – a friend’s house, community center, work, or a library.

This creates a need for “third places” for online access – not home, not work – where people can use the Internet. Libraries fill that “third place” role, not just through public Internet terminals, but also through information their websites provide for the public. Here are key data points from the Pew Research Center:

- 35% of Americans in 2012 accessed the Internet at a library for free – the same share found in the FCC’s 2009 survey for the National Broadband Plan – 35%.
- 44% have used a public library website, with 30% having done so in the past year.
- 77% of all Americans say that free access to computers and the Internet is a very important service for libraries to provide.

And Americans expect more from libraries and technology in a digital age. According to Pew:

- 63% of Americans over the age of 16 say they are likely to use mobile apps that let them have access to libraries’ programs and services.
- 65% of library patrons would like to have a “tech petting zoo” to try out new technology.
- 60% would like to have a digital media lab to digitize personal material.
- Half would like instruction on how to use e-reading device.

Rising Expectations & Demands

In conclusion, let me point out the temptation to think that we’ve lived through most of the Internet revolution. Yet we’ve only lived through the beginning. The advent of “Internet of things” changes the stakes, as the Internet’s usefulness will expand in unforeseen ways. As digital connectivity extends deeply into our homes and persons, as we log onto them to manage energy consumption or our health and diet, the Internet’s usefulness will expand in unforeseen ways. This will challenge many of us to keep up-to-date on our knowledge and skills on how to handle this new wave of applications. That means, as a society, we will need to provide the educational resources to learn what these new services are all about and how to use them.

This leads to three key implications for decision-makers in Congress and the Executive Branch:

- Digital readiness is the next great social policy challenge for those who interested in equity and the Internet.
- Libraries and librarians will be on the front lines of helping Americans negotiate a world where digital applications matter more and more – and therefore digital readiness is indispensable for everyone.

- Libraries will have more demands placed upon them, which makes the case for ensuring they have the resources to meet these demands compelling.

Increasingly, decision-makers in the public and private sector expect that everyone has high-speed Internet at home. The notion that 30% of Americans do not astounds them. The idea that almost 18% of the highly connected set of online users has low levels of digital readiness would also baffle them. Addressing the challenge of digital readiness is something libraries know how to do – and will do with the right support.

About John B. Horrigan, PhD

John B. Horrigan is an independent communications and technology policy consultant. Horrigan's work focuses on consumers' adoption and use of information and communications technologies, as well as ICTs' impacts on states and localities. He is most recently author of a landmark report "The Essentials of Connectivity" that makes recommendations on how to accelerate broadband adoption and usage by examining broadband users enrolled in Comcast's Internet Essentials program. He also authored, for the Knight Foundation, "Adoption of Information and Communications Technologies in the United States: Narrowing Gaps, New Challenges."

Horrigan has served in senior positions at the Pew Research Center, the Joint Center for Political & Economic Studies, and TechNet. At the Federal Communications Commission in 2009-10, he led development of the broadband adoption and usage portion of the National Broadband Plan. Horrigan has a Ph.D. in public policy from the University of Texas at Austin and his undergraduate degree from the University of Virginia.