

YOUR TECHNOLOGY OUTREACH ADVENTURE

Tools for Human-Centered Problem Solving

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PREFACE

What does it mean to be technology literate in today's world? It is more than just understanding how to perform a Google search for a new apple pie recipe. Technology-literate citizens of the world are able to adapt quickly to changes. They are critical thinkers who explore creative uses of technology devices. Those who are technology literate do not have an innate fear of new devices; they are comfortable with failure and confident in trying new things. Technology-literate people no longer view new technology as magic; they understand how things work and know how to find answers when they face stumbling blocks. All of these factors lead to a citizenry that is excited about learning new technology and finding ways of integrating it into their everyday lives.

The twenty-first century has ushered in an era of integrated technology lifestyles. We live in a world where 77 percent of Americans have a smartphone in their pockets and 95 percent have a cellphone of some kind.¹ We are connected to the global community in an unprecedented way. Technology now touches every part of our lives, whether we have embraced it or not. For many of us, our screens are the first thing we touch in the morning and the last thing we interact with before going to sleep. Technological devices are deeply embedded in our lives but are also in a constant state of flux. Every day a new update comes out, a new device is announced, and we all struggle to adapt to this quickly changing environment.

This rapid change creates excitement in many and anxiety in others. Technology has opened up a myriad of doors, unlocking access to nearly the

entirety of human knowledge. Yet, it has also created barriers for those who are not in the know. Those who do not have the means or knowledge to keep up with the latest tech trends may find themselves quickly being left behind. Libraries have unlocked an opportunity to continue their work as the great equalizers of society by bringing technology literacy into their traditional programming repertoire.

Being technology literate is a critical part of successful living today. Many people experience a great deal of fear around technology, and this includes library staff. We are fearful of breaking something expensive, of embarrassing ourselves when what we're trying to do doesn't work, of being unable to teach others how to use the technology themselves. Such fears are compounded when we consider bringing technology outside the library's walls.

Although these are valid fears, they are ones we can overcome. Once we discover the technology needs of our communities, we can reframe how we approach teaching technology literacy. We begin by understanding that we are not teaching the technology itself. Instead, we are teaching critical thinking; technology is simply the tool we use to teach this process. Additionally, we are using the library's resources to give people exposure to technology they may not be able to afford at home. This brings people into the connected world; they can put their hands on something they heard about in the news instead of just seeing it as another stumbling block to overcome.

Many libraries across the country have seen the need to develop technology literacy programming in their buildings. Libraries are building makerspaces, teaching coding, and hosting e-reader trainings. The people who come into the library seeking access to technology are gaining it! Yet, with so much fear surrounding technology, many are reluctant to seek help. Some people may not even feel comfortable in the library and so are not likely to visit, much less consider coming in for a program on a topic they know nothing about or even see a need for in their day-to-day lives. In-library programs can reach only the people who choose to come into the library.

Such limited audiences and the common fears surrounding technology present a unique opportunity for libraries. Librarians can now mix traditional outreach models with the technology programming we are already perfecting. By blending these services we can reach people in the spaces where they feel comfortable, such as churches or laundromats, parks or senior centers. By adopting technology outreach as a standard practice, we remove barriers to access. People will be more comfortable working with

unfamiliar technology tools when they are in familiar spaces, and when they have permission to fail.

I designed this book to give you the tools you need to create strong technology-based outreach programming. We'll begin with an exploration of outreach basics and the specific needs that come with adding technology to your outreach. Then, we'll look at human-centered design thinking through exercises that will teach you how to get to know your community and how to design outreach programs that keep people front and center. The tools that I present through these exercises will help to ease the technology fears your staff may feel, giving them a safe place to fail successfully. Last, we'll look at some real-world case studies of technology outreach programs from my work as Innovations Manager at the San José Public Library.

Reaching beyond the walls of our libraries is critical because our most at-need populations are often those who do not have access to our library buildings. This is especially true in rural locations or in areas with limited services. We have to meet people where they are. Libraries provide the platform that enables us to connect people to technology and to teach them critical thinking and creative problem solving. When we alleviate our fears about combining technology and outreach, doors will open to a whole new world of programming options. It is my hope that this book will help you to connect with your community in new ways, to approach solving problems with new tools, and to reach new populations through technology.

NOTE

1. "Mobile Fact Sheet," Pew Research Center, "Internet and Technology," February 5, 2018, www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheet/mobile.

1

BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

For generations, librarians have been the gatekeepers to knowledge. They have preserved history in the tombs of texts, unlocking passages for those who entered through their doors. Information was not always immediately accessible in your pocket like it is today. Instead, if you wanted to tap into the knowledge of the world, you had to venture down to the local library, tiptoe your way through endless stacks of books, and spend hours getting lost in microfiche. The library held all of the information within its materials, and the librarians were there to instruct you on how to access it all. Their combined mission was to serve information needs—to teach literacy.

TRADITION IN LITERACY INSTRUCTION

Although walking into a modern-day library may feel very different from entering the charming rooms locked away in your memory, the library's mission remains the same: literacy. When we get to the core of what a public library is for, we always return to literacy. One of the library's roles in our society is to teach people the skills needed to be competent in a certain area, to possess knowledge. The library exists to create informed citizens who can be their best possible selves and also be engaged in the democracy of their communities. In today's world, libraries are looking at literacy through a new lens.

A librarian's job used to be primarily about reading literacy. Beginning with young children, a librarian's work revolved around teaching people how to unlock the information held within the texts that lined the library walls. The librarian taught search strategies, how to evaluate sources, and critical-thinking skills. Without the Internet, there were limited pathways to accessing knowledge. The library was the place you would go to gain the skills and knowledge needed to interact with the world around you. Today's librarians still do all these things, but they now have additional literacies to teach.

With the advent of the Internet and the explosion of technology, people began finding their information in new ways; they explored and interacted with the world differently from how they had in the past. Large segments of the population are now connected to the Internet in some fashion (e.g., via broadband or mobile phone service). According to the Pew Research Center, "Adoption rates are only one component of the digital divide, however. A person's comfort level with technology and the rate in which they use the internet at work and in their everyday lives also varies by income group." Even as more people become connected, those at lower socioeconomic levels still struggle with adoption.

Libraries, being the great equalizer, jumped at the opportunity to level the playing field in the quest for knowledge and were some of the first places to offer the public free access to computers and later the Internet. With these new technological tools, librarians found themselves needing to teach people how to unlock the knowledge trapped behind a screen.

ACCESS AND KNOWLEDGE

Libraries may be the only place where some people are able to access technology. However, equality of access cannot happen if people are unfamiliar with how the technology works in the first place. Our responsibility as librarians is to put together programming and resources that assist people in learning these technologies. We have to go beyond just basic computer classes and simply teaching patrons how to use a device. Instead, we are charged with assisting people in becoming critical thinkers so they can adapt quickly when technology changes. Today's world is complicated, and navigating through it can be frustrating and overwhelming for many. Some will

become overwhelmed by their frustration, choosing not to adapt at all and setting themselves up to be left behind.

With an ever-changing technology landscape, what can we do to ensure no one in our society is left behind? How can we ensure that those people in our communities who are afraid of adopting technology, or who don't have access to it, can gain the skills needed to participate fully as twenty-first-century citizens? Although we may have the latest and greatest technology residing within the walls of our libraries, it can serve only those who walk through our doors.

In 2016, the Pew Research Center found that 29 percent of the lowest adopters of technology, those living in households making \$30,000 or less a year, have never visited a library; yet, 80 percent of respondents said they felt the library had great value and should offer programs to teach people digital skills.² The great news is that many libraries across the United States already do this, from computer classes to coding workshops. Still, with nearly all these offerings happening within the physical library space, those 29 percent of low technology adopters who do not visit the library are being left behind. Even the majority of library visitors are not participating in technology-based programming; only 27 percent of patrons attended a library program in 2016.³ We need to discover a new way of providing access to technology and technology training in order to reach all our citizens who are in need.

FEAR OF TECHNOLOGY

One of the primary reasons people avoid technology is fear. This fear keeps many people from even connecting to the Internet and becomes stronger in the face of emerging high-tech tools. Such strong feelings of apprehension based on a perceived threat may cause people to feel too embarrassed to come into a library to ask for help.

Although it may be easy for most of us to think of a library as a safe and welcoming place, the library can be intimidating for those who do not understand how it works or what it has to offer. On top of that, there is a psychological cost to asking for help. People may feel uncomfortable seeking help, either because they think they might be bothering someone or because they are afraid of being seen as incompetent.⁴ Lots of people experience fear

surrounding technology—fear of the unknown, of failing, of looking like a fool. Such fears are compounded when people are faced with learning something new in an unfamiliar, public space.

In 2015, Chapman University released its Survey of American Fears. The top three fears concerned technology. Christopher Bader, a professor of sociology at the university, explains:

People tend to express the highest level of fear for things they're dependent on but that they don't have any control over, and that's almost the perfect definition of technology. You can no longer make it in society without using technology you don't understand to buy things at a store, to talk to other people, to conduct business. People are increasingly dependent, but they don't have any idea how these things actually work.⁵

If people need to interact with technology in order to navigate in this world but are too fearful to adopt the technology or learn how to use it, then we are faced with a major inequality within our society. Many technologies, and primarily the Internet, are our main sources for information gathering. We have to ensure that all of our residents know how to safely and confidently navigate through the high-tech world we are living in. One way we can do this is to go into the streets, meeting people where they already feel comfortable gathering.

BRINGING TECHNOLOGY INTO THE STREETS

Outreach is nothing new to libraries. Public libraries have acted as bridges out into communities for nearly as long as they have been active. In 1905, Mary Titcomb became the first to introduce the bookmobile to her community in the United States.⁶ Titcomb identified a need for access to books in the remote rural areas of Washington County, Maryland. She was awarded a Carnegie grant of \$2,500 that she used to create the nation's first outreach service. Since then, librarians all around the world have been seeking new ways to go beyond the walls of their libraries to serve people directly in the community.

Traditionally, library outreach has taken a few different forms, with the main purpose being to promote library services, not to deliver those services

directly. Many of you will be familiar with this standard awareness-based type of outreach: Your library sends a librarian, you, to a community event or meeting to man a table that is stocked with leaflets and fliers about services and events back at the library. This style of outreach is all about marketing. Your job is to raise awareness about what the library is doing within its walls or through its website. Sometimes a small activity may also take place at the booth as a means to lure people in for a longer discussion about what the library has to offer.

Many libraries are taking this style of outreach one step further by setting up laptops and Wi-Fi hot spots in order to sign up people for library cards. This transforms an awareness-based outreach model into a service-based outreach model. These are some of the other common outreach programs that fall into this category:

- › Storytimes
- › Library instruction
- › Bookmobiles
- › Homebound delivery

One of the newest types of service-based outreach uses technology. Traditional bookmobiles are being converted into computer labs or technology filled buses. Librarians are teaching patrons how to use e-readers and check out e-books in addition to the standard library database instruction. This movement into technology-based outreach is what we'll be covering in this book. It can be the most intimidating type of outreach, but also the most rewarding.

Leaving the library to do outreach always presents a whole new set of challenges. Adding technology brings in an extra level of complexity. You might not even know where to begin beyond knowing that you want to offer some sort of technology-based outreach. That's okay! We'll begin in the next chapter by learning about the fundamentals that you will need to create successful technology-based outreach programs.

NOTES

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- www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/03/22/digital-divide-persists-even-as-lower-income-americans-make-gains-in-tech-adoption.
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