

WHITE PAPER

# Libraries' Second Digital Transformation

Public Libraries in the United States Turn to Digital Inclusion in a Fast-Changing Online Landscape

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By John B. Horrigan, Ph.D., ULC Senior Research Advisor

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# Libraries' Second Digital Transformation:

## Public Libraries in the United States Turn to Digital Inclusion in a Fast-Changing Online Landscape

BY JOHN B. HARRIGAN, PH.D., ULC SENIOR RESEARCH ADVISOR

### Methodological Note

This white paper brings together data from three separate sources on how libraries deliver a range of services to people in their communities. First, there is national survey data from the Pew Research Center on how Americans use and view libraries. Much of that data come from surveys on the public's views on libraries from 2015 and 2016, as well as surveys about people's attitudes about information and digital skills. Second, the Aspen Institute, International City/County Management Association and Public Library Association conducted a survey in 2016 of over 2,000 local government officials. That survey examined community priorities and where libraries fit in meeting them.

Finally, the ULC Edge data discussed in this report reflects the 81 ULC Edge Collaborative members who used Edge in 2017. Though these libraries are a small subset of total Edge users, they represent a diverse range of tech-forward communities from across the U.S. and Canada, offering a wide view of how today's public libraries are promoting digital inclusion, information literacy and engagement in their communities.

### About the Urban Libraries Council

The Urban Libraries Council, founded in 1971, is the voice for public libraries and the force that inspires them to evolve. ULC creates the tools, techniques, and ideas to make ongoing improvements and upgrades in services and technology. ULC also speaks loudly and clearly about the value public libraries bring to communities, and secures funding for research that results in the development of new programs and services. And by serving as a forum for library leadership, ULC produces innovative ideas and best practices that ensure community impact.

## Executive Summary

Libraries are leading a second digital transformation. The past decade and a half have seen libraries expand their missions in response to the information age, as they have provided computer and internet access for their communities, resources for digital skills and e-books. Today a new era of digital transformation is dawning for libraries as they become places for digital inclusion. Digital inclusion refers to the tech devices, digital training, high-speed networks, tech support and online content that help people fully participate in a digital society.

Public libraries' pivot to digital inclusion is an outgrowth of two things. First, there is the recognition that learning, civic engagement, job training and more all flow through the internet. Second, the digital applications for these purposes require higher order digital capabilities than in the past. Digital skills now encompass tools to help people determine what information to trust online and how to protect the privacy of their data. "Tech at the library" continues to mean access to computers, but also tablet computers, cutting edge tech gear and high-speed networks.

This new report from the Urban Libraries Council documents how the public, libraries and public officials see the role of libraries in people's lives and communities, with a special focus on the role of digital inclusion in providing services to people and communities. The report uses data from surveys of the public (from the Pew Research Center), local government officials (from a survey sponsored by the Aspen Institute, Public Library Association and

International City/County Management Association) and libraries (from ULC Edge Collaborative members). Key findings are:

### **The public, local government officials and libraries see digital inclusion as foundational to libraries' missions.**

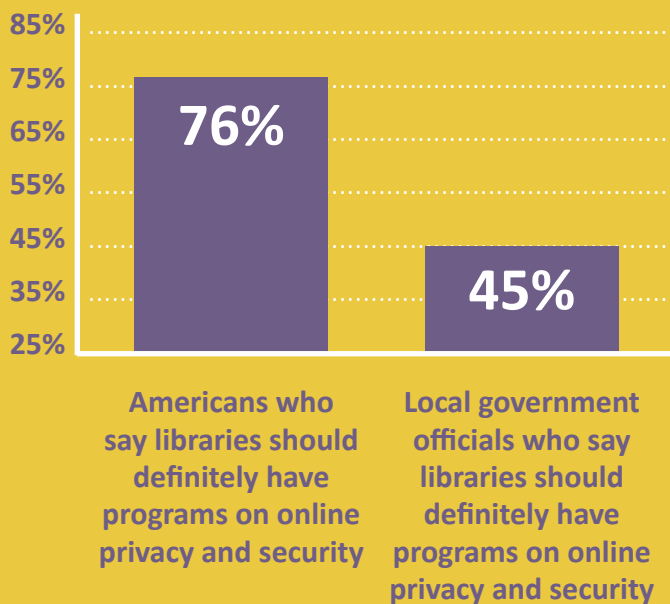
Some 78 percent of Americans say libraries should definitely offer programs for digital skills and 76 percent say libraries should offer programs to teach people how to protect their privacy and security online. A clear majority of the public (60 percent) is interested in training on how to use online resources to find trustworthy information.

Among local government officials, 76 percent say providing access to high-speed internet service is a high or very high priority in their community. Half (51 percent) of local government officials see digital literacy as a high or very high priority for their community. As to the role of libraries, 73 percent of government officials say providing access to high-speed internet is an important or highly important function for libraries and 63 percent say libraries should definitely offer programs to foster digital literacy. Many local officials also have specific concerns for those less well-off; 50 percent of local government officials also think libraries should offer services to help low-income families sort through broadband service plans. Among ULC Edge Collaborative members, 89 percent have digital inclusion and innovation goals in their strategic plans.

## When thinking about resources to cope with online privacy and security, the public is way ahead of local government officials.

The general public is much more likely than local government officials to express interest in a key dimension of digital inclusion — programs at libraries on online security and privacy. By a 76 to 45 percent margin, Americans are more likely than government officials to say libraries should definitely offer programs to teach people how to protect their online privacy and security.

### Online Privacy and Security: The Public vs. Local Government Officials



## Introduction

Over the past decade, libraries have reflected on their missions in the face of technological changes that have impacted how people obtain information, learn and participate in society. As digital technologies advanced through the 2000s, libraries began to understand they had to adapt as well. As the Aspen Institute's Dialogue on Public Libraries recognized in 2014, libraries had to attend to the three P's — people, place and platform. The library had to foster digital connectivity, update its role as a center of learning and cultivate community.

In just a few short years, the digital world has deepened its role in people's daily lives. Constant connectivity means people can use mobile apps to manage their lives and log on to appliances at home. Almost any activity important to people — learning, applying for a job, scratching a creative itch — relies on the internet. This places a premium on not just access to the internet, but also the skills to use the internet to pursue these ends.

Where can people turn for skills and information nuggets necessary for the digital landscape — especially those without tech support readily available in the workplace or for hire? Libraries are the trusted institutions in communities that can help people in this rapidly evolving digital era — which brings digital inclusion squarely into their missions. But libraries cannot simply assume that their users can seamlessly embrace the use of digital tools to carry out tasks. To meet the needs of the people they serve, libraries have to offer the technology, skills and information literacy to help people keep up with societal change.

All this is why libraries are becoming hubs for digital inclusion. This is part of the second digital transformation for libraries — where libraries become centers of digital inclusion in addition to providing online access. Digital inclusion refers not only to libraries providing internet connectivity to those who come to the library for that purpose — something libraries have been doing for more than a decade — it also extends to providing people the ability to upgrade their digital skills and to understand how to trust the online resources and information that are so critical today.

This white paper brings data together from three separate sources to support the idea that libraries serve as digital hubs that deliver a range of services to people in their communities. First, there is national survey data from the Pew Research Center on how Americans use and view libraries. Much of that data come from surveys on the public's views on libraries from 2015 and 2016, as well as surveys on people's attitudes about information and digital skills. Second, the Aspen Institute, ICMA and PLA conducted a survey in 2016 of over 2,000 local government officials. That survey examined community priorities and where libraries fit in meeting them.

Finally, ULC has data from its Edge tool, which benchmarks libraries' activities in a number of areas, including digital inclusion, information literacy and libraries' engagement with their communities. The ULC Edge data discussed in this report is from 2017 ULC Edge Collaborative members. These libraries completed 81 total Edge assessments, which is a subset of the entire universe of libraries that have used Edge.

## The Emergence of Digital Inclusion

Digital inclusion has grown in prominence in part because Americans across the board understand the importance of having access to the internet. Some 90 percent of Americans say having broadband at home is important — half (49 percent) say it is essential to have broadband and another 41 percent say it is important, though not essential. Local government officials are also well aware of the importance of broadband. Three quarters (76 percent) say that access to high-speed internet service is a high or very high priority in their community.

Given widespread understanding of broadband's importance, it is no surprise that libraries have integrated digital inclusion into their portfolio of services to people and communities. An examination of Americans' attitudes, government officials' views and libraries' self-assessment of priorities shows the prominence of digital inclusion. Among Americans age 16 or older:

- Seventy-eight percent say having programs to teach patrons how to use digital tools such as computers, smartphones or apps is something libraries should definitely do.
- Seventy-six percent say offering programs to teach patrons about protecting their privacy and security online is something libraries should definitely do.

Beyond thinking what libraries should do, Americans also exhibit interest in bolstering their D-IQs — that is, their digital inclusion quotients. When asked about

what would help them to better use information to make decisions:

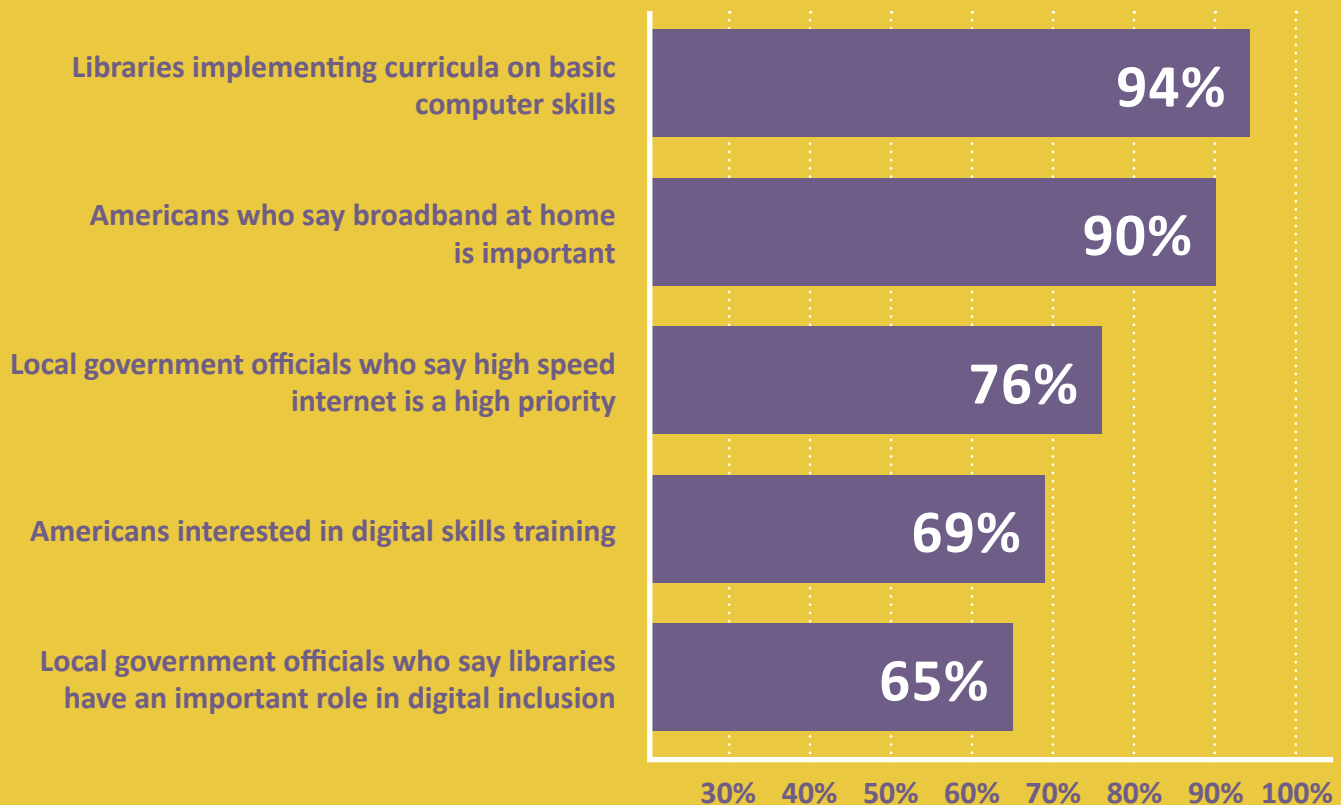
- Sixty percent say training on how to use online resources to find trustworthy information would help them either a lot or somewhat.
- Fifty-four say training to become more confident in using computers, smartphones and the internet would help them either a lot or somewhat.

These two data points show Americans' interest in the two key components of digital inclusion — skills

and trust in information. Put together, the share of Americans who either would like to get training on how to find trustworthy information or have interest in digital skills training is a whopping 69 percent. Just over two-thirds of Americans, in other words, would be interested in resources to cultivate digital skills or information literacy.

The story is similar for local government officials. The survey asked officials about community priorities, the role of libraries in addressing community priorities and what local officials think libraries' priorities should be.

## The Emergence of Digital Inclusion

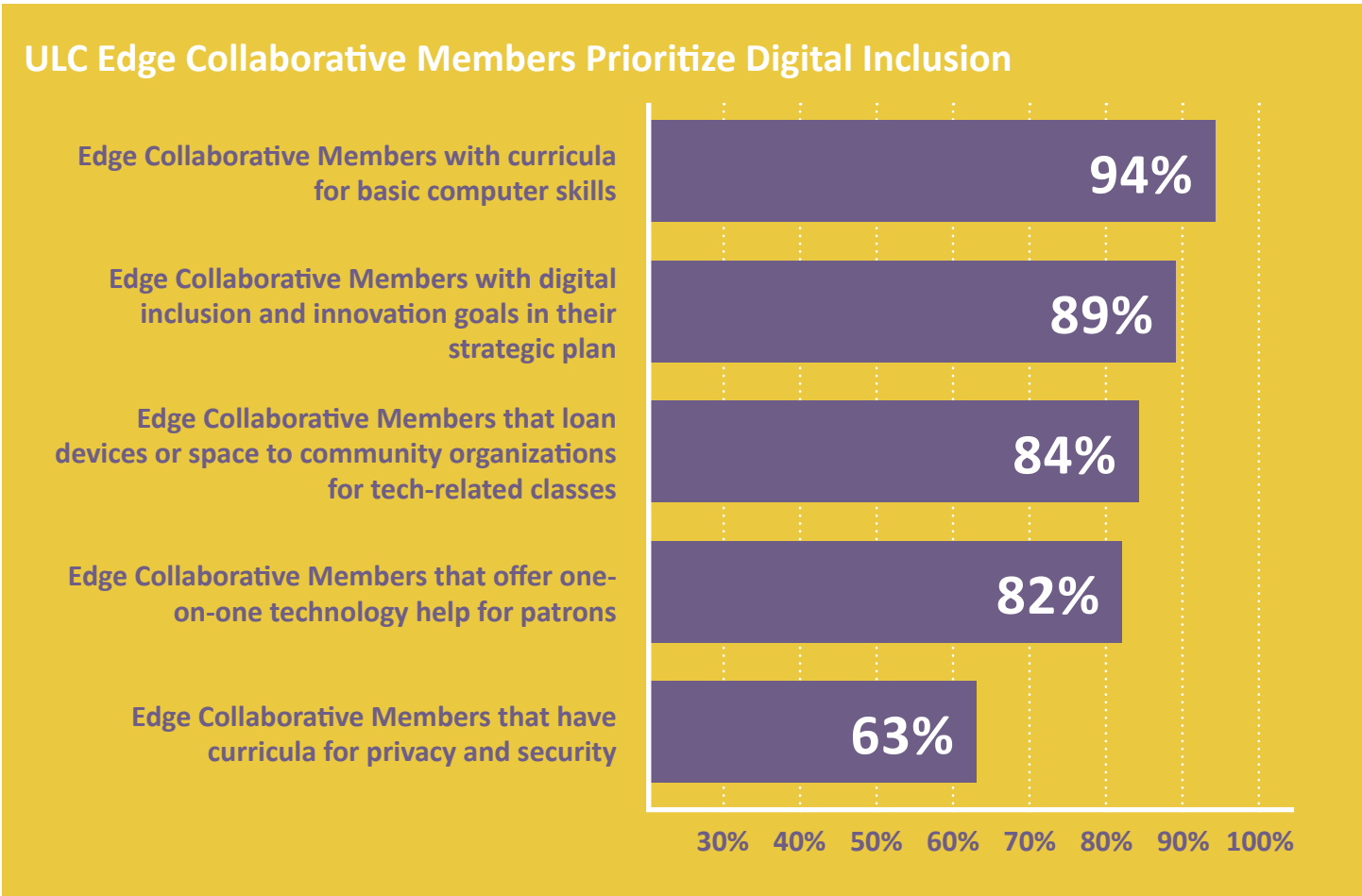


Similar to the general public, local officials see digital inclusion and other dimensions of the internet as important:

- Seventy-three percent say libraries have an important or highly important role in addressing access to high-speed internet service.
- Sixty-five percent say libraries have an important or highly important role in addressing digital inclusion.
- Fifty-one percent say digital literacy is a high or very high priority in their community.

Local officials also weighed in on what they think libraries should do. In particular:

- Eighty-four percent say libraries should definitely offer free high-speed internet and Wi-Fi at the library — a perspective in line with local officials' strong sentiments that these are community-wide priorities.
- Sixty-four percent say libraries should definitely offer programs on digital skills.
- Half (50 percent) say libraries should offer services to help low-income families sort through broadband service plans.



- Some 45 percent say libraries should definitely offer programs that teach people about online privacy and security.

ULC Edge Collaborative member libraries also place a priority on digital inclusion:

- Ninety-four percent have curricula for basic computer skills.
- Eighty-nine percent have digital inclusion and innovation goals in their strategic plan.
- Eighty-four percent loan devices or space to community organizations for tech-related classes.
- Eighty-two percent offer one-on-one technology help for patrons.
- Sixty-three percent have curricula for privacy and security.

## Implications

Several important points come across from looking at data for libraries, local officials and the public. First, there is strong interest in digital inclusion across the board. People are interested in cultivating their digital skills — with an important emphasis on privacy and security — and see libraries as a place to do this. Local officials are largely on board with this, with half saying promoting digital skills is important to their communities and a greater share saying libraries should be part of the solution.

However, it is striking that local officials are less likely to say libraries should offer programs on online privacy and security than the general public. The public is hungry for resources on how to deal with these

issues — and strongly think libraries can help — while local government officials are somewhat tepid about libraries' roles with online privacy and security. As noted, 76 percent of the public think libraries should definitely offer programs to help people protect their online privacy and security, while just 45 percent of local government officials think libraries should definitely do so.

Libraries, at least the ULC Edge Collaborative members, see digital inclusion as front-and-center to their missions. As for online privacy and security, a solid majority (63 percent) see curricula for privacy and security as part of their missions. Libraries also figure prominently into how government officials view solutions to challenges people may face in the digital age. Where government officials see the need for high-speed networks as important to their community — and most do — they also believe libraries should be a place for connectivity, as well as helping consumers sort through internet subscription plans. All in all, for people, libraries and government officials, digital inclusion is not an end itself, but a means toward improving people's lives and the places they live.

## Conclusion

Libraries are deepening their commitment to being beachheads in cyberspace for their communities with an emphasis on digital inclusion. This is in response to high levels of interest from the public for digital skills training and tools for information literacy — including determining what information online is trustworthy. This second digital transformation for libraries — from places that provide access to places that foster



digital inclusion — is a response to other public demands. People turn to libraries for more than books; patrons also seek lifelong learning, services for veterans and resources for immigrants and first-generation Americans.

In several ways, local government officials are aligned with these priorities. They see libraries as places for learning, building digital skills, providing high-speed access and even helping people sort through the ins and outs of internet service plans. Yet there are crucial ways in which local government officials are behind public opinion. Americans, by a large majority (76 percent), would like to see libraries offer training on privacy and security, but less than half (45 percent) of government officials share this view. Americans also view the library as a place for public dialogue in a way that local government officials do not entirely share. About two-thirds (65 percent) of Americans say libraries contribute to their community as gathering places to address local challenges, while just 39 percent of local government officials say libraries should definitely provide a forum for convening public discussions.

ULC Edge Collaborative members serve public needs for digital inclusion and cultivating community development, civic engagement and access to information about health care and health care services. With the public and ULC Edge users aligned on these things, it remains for local officials to more fully align themselves on the role for libraries on a key component of digital inclusion — online privacy and security.

Digital inclusion may not be a service that people will name as an expectation they have of public libraries.

But the data is clear. The elements of digital inclusion — the desire to improve digital skills and the anxiety that prompts people to turn to libraries for skills on how to protect online privacy and security — are at the forefront for people. Local government officials are attuned to this, but to a lesser degree than the general public.

Going forward, libraries and the public have the task of better informing government officials on the importance of digital inclusion to people and their communities.