

Learning from Pandemic Mode to Create a Sustainable Digital Future: Using a Tripartite Model of Information Access and Digital Inclusion

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Abstract

Public libraries are known as places for information, communication, and gathering, but what happens when a pandemic restricts social contact? In the years 2020 and 2021, in response to the coronavirus pandemic, libraries worldwide revised services and explored new ways to provide information and support to communities—primarily through digital services. This conceptual analytical paper responds to this approach by suggesting the use of a tripartite information access and digital inclusion model that can be used for evaluative processes related to ensuring ongoing physical, intellectual, and social access to public library services during a public crisis shutdown. We provide an overview of some of the new and altered services provided within the case of the Richland Library system in South Carolina, USA, and then discuss these changes using the tripartite model as a means to illustrate how this theoretical model can be employed for practical evaluation and decision-making.

Keywords: COVID-19; digital inclusion; public libraries; social distancing; tripartite information access model

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Introduction

In the U.S., as in many countries throughout the world, public libraries are places of community gathering, innovation, and learning. Much of the discussion about the value of public libraries has historically been focused on physical and in-person services such as building access and programming events. Researchers have urged more accessible buildings to meet the needs of disabled users (e.g., Bodaghi & Zainab, 2013; Irvall & Nielsen, 2005), explored the outcomes of creating innovative social gathering opportunities such as live gaming events (e.g., Oravet, 2014), and studied the concept of “Library as Place” (e.g., Council on Library and Information Resources, 2005; Buschman & Leckie, 2007) or as “Third Place” (e.g., Montgomery & Miller, 2011). In fact, early reflections on the role of the public library at the turn of the 21st century questioned whether public libraries could survive the advent of the Internet and the digital age (e.g., D’Elia et al., 2002; Nunberg, 2001). With the quick integration of online interactions, it soon became clear that libraries are not simply physical collections of books and print-focused librarians—they are social institutions driven by “an

ethos of sharing and egalitarianism” (Halpern, 2019) that can therefore adapt and respond to social changes as they occur.

During times of economic downturn, social upheaval, or natural disaster, public libraries are often providers of informational, technical, and social support, as well as intellectual and educational infrastructure and safe meeting spaces for social and community-based interactivity (Chircop, 2009; Rose, 2013; Simon, 2020; Vårheim, 2009). Nevertheless, headlines in the past decade have continued to question the role of the public library in the digital age, but with a more teasing tone as they ask, “Are Libraries Finished?” (Jackson, 2011), “What Will Become of the Library?” (Agresta, 2014), or “Does the Digital World Need Libraries?” (Burton, 2017), and then accompanying articles provide a long list of ways that public libraries have evolved alongside the social changes that have followed in the blazing wake of the World Wide Web.

In 2020-2021, during the COVID-19 shutdowns and with local, national, and global requirements for social distancing, public libraries have needed to shift their focus from how to gather and bring the community together physically, to how to provide information infrastructures and services, training, social connection, and supports virtually (Feldman, 2020a, 2020b). This shift is spotlighted in the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA, 2020) statement for the United Nations 59th Session of the Commission on Social Development, reiterating the need for libraries to provide greater digital outreach:

[L]ibraries globally have broadly strongly welcomed the emergence and spread of digital technologies, and indeed have participated actively in elements of their development. They offer exciting possibilities to bring more information to more people, in new formats, and to give previously excluded or unrepresented groups a voice, outside of traditional and often strictly controlled channels. (p. 2)

The IFLA statement also highlights that the COVID-19 pandemic brought with it a new issue in the evolution of public libraries: the pandemic “illustrated the costs of being offline, with children excluded from education, adults from their work, patients from eHealth solutions, and people from their friends and families” (p. 3). Indeed, the 2020-2021 pandemic situation underscored the importance of ensuring that public library services extend much further beyond in-person services inside of the traditional brick and mortar building. To further this analysis, we will use Richland Library in the U.S. state of South Carolina to describe and explore the way a public library can and has continued to meet their mission of “helping customers learn, create and share” by “providing free, accessible information and services for people of all ages and backgrounds” (Richland Library, 2019) during the 2020-2021 pandemic and ensuing community shutdowns and shifts in service delivery. One of the authors, Amanda Reed, is Assistant Director of Library Experience at Richland Library and so brings to this discussion practical insights about the Library decision-making process and an overview of the services offered during the pandemic. Kim Thompson is a professor at the University of South Carolina and brings to this discussion theoretical perspectives using the tripartite information access model (Thompson, 2016; Thompson & Afzal, 2011; Thompson et al., 2014), which we use for our analysis. We apply a deductive approach, employing the tripartite information access model to explore facets of information access and digital inclusion based on the idea that full access and inclusion are predicated on physical, intellectual, and social factors.

Theoretical Approach to Practice: The Tripartite Model of Digital Inclusion

Theoretical frameworks and models are used to help us understand and explain aspects of the social world. When we use an existing theoretical model to analyze new data, this is a deductive approach to using theory (Matthews & Ross, 2010). In their book *Theory Building in Applied Disciplines*, Swanson and Chermack (2013) note that in applied disciplines—or disciplines that apply scholarly research to professional practice (which, we argue, aptly describes library and information science)—theory matters. Without theory, Swanson and Chermack note, we run the risk of putting more weight on opinion than on inquiry or “celebrat[ing] rock star practitioners who are hollow role models” (p. 10), leading to incomplete evaluations and scattered decisions. The goal is not to just do what others have done before us, the goal is to provide the best services for our own communities and users. Theory helps us do this.

Thompson et al.’s (2014) book *Digital Literacy and Digital Inclusion* provides a model that represents the concept of digital inclusion through three lenses - tripartite: physical, intellectual/literacy, and social access. Physical digital inclusion focuses on physical access to digital technologies and devices, including but not limited to Wi-Fi and other infrastructures, public and personal resources, as well as physical spaces that provide digital services such as public libraries. Pandemic-related social distancing, public restrictions during times of social unrest, and natural disasters were three 2020-2021 phenomena that created the need for public libraries worldwide to either practice voluntary or government-mandated shutdowns, or otherwise made it difficult or impossible for regular physical library and information services to be offered. During times when the doors of the library cannot be opened, how can the public library support physical access to information and digital inclusion? How can libraries know whether they are supporting stakeholder physical access to information?

The second lens through which to view digital inclusion and information access is through an intellectual or literacy lens which focuses on a central question: What are the literacies and trainings needed for optimal or even basic access to digital information and resources? Traditional education, digital, and other literacy trainings are provided today by school systems, professional development opportunities in the workplace, and through public opportunities such as those provided by public libraries and other information organizations. If someone has physical access to the infrastructure but does not know how to navigate or use the digital resources and services, it is difficult or even impossible to be digitally connected or engaged. The COVID year of 2020-2021 induced social restrictions and/or prevented in-person contact for tutoring, training, and mentoring except via digital platforms. While online learning and teaching can be an excellent and inclusive method used in public libraries (Banas & Wartalski, 2019; Cadima et al., 2012), it can also be ineffective and a waste of resources if done without proper planning and pedagogical understanding. What can public libraries do during a pandemic shutdown to ensure they are engaging in best practices in terms of intellectual access to information, and providing digital trainings, and literacy support?

Social access and inclusion are the third lens of the tripartite model, with a focus on the social supports and barriers to information and digital inclusion. Social information access and inclusion efforts include building community through events and activities targeting a range of demographic groupings, providing outreach services, and sincerely seeking to foster unity and “radical civility” (Cameron, 2018). It is through social inclusion that public libraries advance adoption of innovative means of community engagement where individuals have the

opportunity to build their own identity (Williams, 1956) as integrated library users and a necessary part of the information landscape, as well as contributing to building an overall community identity and social culture (Leckie & Hopkins, 2002). What can public libraries do with social media (Pundsack, 2019) and other resources to support and expand social justice (Gustina & Guinnee, 2017) and civic engagement (Wilson, 2017) during local or national crises?

We notice that these same three aspects of digital inclusion—physical, intellectual, and social access—are highlighted in the IFLA (2020) statement, which reflects this tripartite structure. Its first area of focus, “Everyone Connected,” asks the United Nations Commission on Social Development to ask governments to provide (physical) connections and infrastructures (schools, libraries), “and other community anchors” and ensure that digital technologies and infrastructures be supported to provide physical access and reduce the digital divide (p. 3). “Everyone Enabled” (intellectual) is their second touchpoint, asking that governments and organizations support training in skills for “effective use of the internet,” particularly for vulnerable individuals (p. 3), and their third subsection, “Everyone Informed,” (social) stresses the importance of social inclusion, particularly for children and other beginner users of digital technologies. Figure 1 below overlays the IFLA areas of focus over the tripartite model of digital inclusion (see Figure 1).

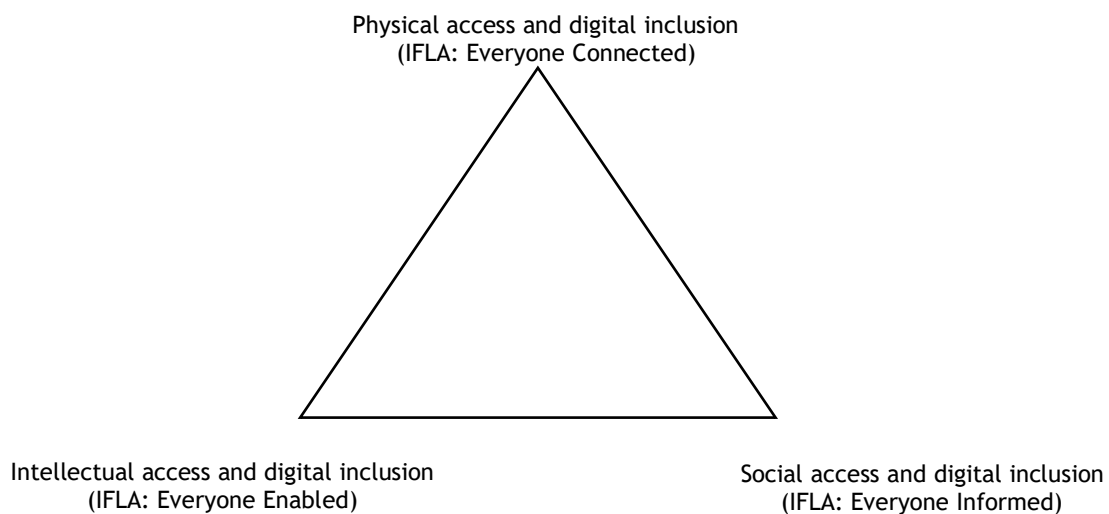


Figure 1 IFLA Focus Overlaying the Tripartite Information Access and Digital Inclusion Model

The beauty of theoretical models is that they are a visual representation of more generalized ideas and can be extremely useful for analyzing, evaluating, and making decisions about practice. Once the model is understood, it is not difficult to use, as will be demonstrated in this article with this very simple but meaningful model. This tripartite digital inclusion model provides a facilitative structure for understanding and evaluating decisions about the physical, intellectual, and social facets of information access and digital inclusion and can be used to examine how public libraries are designing and offering resources and services to ensure that community information and digital needs are being met.

In the following section we will provide an overview of the 2020-2021 context and outline the changes in Richland Library that followed the March 2020 pandemic shutdowns, using the tripartite model as a structure for analysis. We will provide cues (i.e., physical access; intellectual access; social access) to note where we have identified topics that relate to the three corners of the model. After providing the overview, we will provide a broad conceptual analysis of the new programs offered and changes made using the tripartite model as a theoretical lens to examine concepts of digital inclusion and information access.

The Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020-2021

In January and February of 2020, Richland Library, in Richland County, South Carolina, U.S. was keeping a close eye on the emerging COVID-19 outbreak, never imagining its physical spaces would be so deeply affected. Yet, by March 15, 2020, the state's governor closed all schools across the state and, a few days later, directed state agencies to identify non-essential activities (McMaster, 2020a) leading to Executive Order 2020-17 which closed entertainment, recreational, and other non-essential close-contact entities (McMaster, 2020b). Richland Library, a public library system in a county of 415,759 residents (US Census Bureau, 2019) with a main library and 12 branch locations, had fully closed with this first wave of shutdowns, quickly realizing that its communities would need key information services to function during the pandemic crisis.

The digital divide, or the gap between those who have digital access and inclusion and those who do not, was something the Richland Library was already aware of and trying to help overcome; however, COVID-19 made this issue balloon into the number one challenge for staff to address. To proactively address the immediate impacts of the pandemic on library information services, the first line of service library staff enacted was on-demand phone call response. Within the first week of shut-down Richland Library staff were working from home, with library phones forwarded to staff personal phones for them to answer questions including: "What is Covid?" "How dangerous is this, really?" "What are the symptoms?" "What precautions do I need to take?" While much information was posted online, or being pushed out through news broadcasts (television, radio, newspapers), community members had localized questions and were looking for authoritative and trustworthy resources for answers. To that end, Richland Library partnered with organizations like the South Carolina Department of Employment and Workforce (SCDEW) to assist in answering phones for people needing to file for unemployment as businesses closed and jobs were eliminated or working hours reduced. Eleven percent of South Carolina residents were unemployed within the first month of the pandemic and SCDEW could not manage the sheer volume of calls, totaling more than 85,000 claims the first week of April 2020, which was the second month of the pandemic shutdown (Coleburn, 2020). In addition, the Library saw Spanish-language phone inquiries spike (the demographics of Richland County are 45.4% White, 48.7% Black or African American, 5.3% Hispanic or Latino, 3% Asian [U.S. Census, 2019]).

While many households had broadband internet connections, nearly six percent, or 10,300 residences, in Richland County relied on school, workplace, or public Wi-Fi connections for daily access (Ellis, 2020). For the most part, schools and places of business provided laptops and other devices to students and employees for work- and study-related outcomes, but Wi-Fi connections were not as easy to access. Richland Library sought funding and partnered with organizations like the Housing Authority to assist in identifying households that needed Wi-Fi access and ensured that Wi-Fi was turned on in library parking lots where locals could sit in

their cars to apply for federal assistance or log in for work or school purposes (Richland Library, 2020). As the weeks passed and COVID-19 cases rose, it became clear that the county would continue to be on socially distanced restrictions for many more months, so the Richland Library administration began designing a phased crisis plan for reopening the physical building based on the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines. However, cases continued to rise, postponing re-openings time and time again, encouraging the Library staff to reinvent all services possible to suit online and socially distanced formats. In the following sections we will provide a brief overview of these changes in service.

Changes to Richland Library Infrastructures and Services

The first changes made in Richland Library were emergency responses to pressing needs. A Spanish language phone tree was set up as quickly as possible, routing Spanish language calls to a messaging service, and Spanish-speaking staff would quickly return the call to answer inquiries (this action indicates the intellectual access to information and social connection aspects of the tripartite model). The Richland Library website was already well organized and well-used, but updates were made daily to keep up with the many changes in service and opportunities as they arose. Announcements of these changes were communicated with the Richland Library audience through its website (<https://www.richlandlibrary.com/>) and social media channels.

Publishers expanded online service policies and contracts for e-Books, audiobooks, and physical access to other digital library services (tripartite model: physical access). For example, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns, with one publisher, a public library could purchase only one copy of a newly released book after the first eight weeks of publication. With COVID-19, this policy was relaxed to allow multiple library purchases as soon as a book went on sale (Friedman, 2020). Similarly, streaming e-Book, music, video, and audio-book providers such as Hoopla, cloudLibrary, and Kanopy temporarily opened up their check-out restrictions, allowing users to circulate more items than usual (Eubank, 2020). The Richland Library also provided a new service in personalized reading recommendations via their website to ensure readers were supported in finding appropriate and desirable reading whether for learning, self-help, or for leisure (tripartite model: intellectual access, social access).

Printing was a physical service that customers of Richland Library continued to request throughout the pandemic shutdown period. While scanning was not possible to work around, as scanning requires more touching of devices and papers, the Library was able to continue other services with minimal difficulty. Users were asked to use a proprietary library printing system, SmartAlec, to order print jobs. SmartAlec allows users to send print jobs directly to the printer from their own Smartphone or laptop, and then the patron could pick up the hard copies through drive-through or curbside services. In addition, Richland Library's Library of Things (<https://www.richlandlibrary.com/libraryofthings>) added 60 new items to provide community members resources including media arts equipment, access to Adobe Creative Suite, and the library also loaned woodworking equipment and tools, giving entrepreneurs and at-home workers free access to checkout items online or via curbside pickup.

Due to COVID-19, the brick-and-mortar branches throughout the library system were closed to the public from March 2020 until October 2020; however, library patrons could pick up materials at drive-through locations as early as June 2020, and curbside pickup shortly thereafter, thus ensuring continued physical access to the library's information services

(tripartite model: physical access). Setting up these kinds of distal services meant that the library staff needed to have an understanding of how to comply with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention¹ and the American Library Association's² guidelines for materials handling and safe interpersonal interactions, such as avoiding card handling and minimizing physical contact.

When the main library reopened for limited in-door services in October 2020, plexiglass barriers were erected, and furniture removed to create space in compliance with established COVID-19 protocols. Staff worked to create a “warm and welcoming” atmosphere with directional signage to show movement patterns and help users navigate spaces safely (tripartite model: social access, intellectual access). For the most part, user feedback was overwhelmingly positive, noting appreciation of the safety protocols, provision of masks, guarding of social distance, and other small changes that ensured their ability to use the physical spaces but also maintain the community's health and safety, including that of the Library staff. User feedback was provided passively by phone and in-person customers who shared their experiences with staff.

Services for Small Businesses and Entrepreneurs

One of the first digital service adjustments made in response to COVID-19 was in helping small businesses and unemployed individuals sign up for government subsidies. Richland Library was able to work with community partners and create virtual information services to connect with small businesses, solopreneurs, and workers facing unemployment (tripartite model: intellectual access, social access). With the many loans and grants available, the Library could help reduce the guesswork of the application process and help customers connect directly with needed resources (tripartite model: physical access). Indeed, Richland Library's Employment & Small Business Help page³ was built and cultivated by the library's marketing department and Business and Careers team to help the community navigate financial assistance opportunities, identify next steps for loan and grant applications, and to find resources available through the library and other community organizations.

The Library's Business and Careers⁴ and Studio Services⁵ teams also began hosting a weekly meeting with local partner organizations to share information and resources relevant to small businesses and unemployed workers (tripartite model: intellectual access). Representatives from SCDEW, the Small Business Association, and the South Carolina Small Business Development Center, along with city and county representatives, continued to meet online to discuss community needs and to collaborate on programming and community engagement (tripartite model: social access). Appointments for job searching and unemployment assistance shifted to Zoom and phone appointments with a dedicated phone line for job seekers to reach one of the Library's 30 career coaches (tripartite model: physical access). The Library invested funds to post billboards to advertise this service around town to try and reach those who may not be seeing this information online (tripartite model: intellectual access).

Richland Library also created a Facebook group for entrepreneurs and small businesses⁶. This Facebook group is managed by a group of library staff and community-based small business experts to provide tips, webinars, and practical advice to over 1,800 group members who have been able to network and continue connecting virtually with their small business colleagues (tripartite model: intellectual access). This activity feeds into the Richland Library Entrepreneurs in Residence program wherein entrepreneurs are identified from different

business backgrounds and areas of expertise and are recruited to offer one-on-one virtual small business coaching and Zoom programs geared toward small businesses (tripartite model: social access, intellectual access). An ALA Libraries Build Business grant was successfully sought to allow the Library's Entrepreneur in Residence⁷ program to go virtual (tripartite model: physical access).

Services for Students and Home Learning

Richland Library's Education Studio⁸ already existed, with a mission to improve the educational outcomes for the youth of Richland County. This department specializes in providing resources and programming for struggling and emerging readers. It is also an information hub for homeschool parents because of its curated curriculum for reading, writing, and math. The Studio's Reading Specialists continued to meet one-on-one with parents, teachers, and tutors in "coaching appointments" and outline strategies to help struggling readers become stronger readers (tripartite model: social access, intellectual access). In the past, physical access to books, materials, and educational programming was readily available and the specialists conducted parent workshops on helping struggling readers at home. Due to the pandemic, these services were updated to provide digital access (tripartite model: physical access).

The specialists also traditionally have offered a weekly pre-literacy class to 4- and 5-year-olds and conducted a yearly two-week summer camp for children with dyslexia and struggling readers (tripartite model: intellectual access). Social distancing protocol caused the Education Studio to rethink how to provide services in the virtual world. Staff brainstormed on how to recreate educational programming and provide services to a large population of struggling readers. They channeled funding into Lexia Core 5⁹, a digital reading intervention program, allowing parents and tutors to continue to provide literacy support from home (tripartite model: physical access).

With more parents and caregivers educating their children at home on a limited income, the Education Studio saw an uptick in customers seeking educational resources. Purchasing quality materials to help a child learn to read can be quite expensive, and this was particularly troublesome during a time when small businesses were closing and many were losing work, were on furlough, or simply did not know if their income would continue throughout the year. The Reading Specialists responded to potential community learning support needs by purchasing multiple sets of All About Reading Curriculum¹⁰. This reading curriculum includes teacher/parent guides, student workbooks and reading manipulatives that carefully map out how to teach reading at home (tripartite model: physical access, intellectual access).

Staff also had to reimagine their pre-literacy program. They developed take-home kits, as "pre-literacy in a box," that encourage problem solving, exploration, narrative expression, handwriting development, and phonemic awareness. A total of 250 physical kits were distributed across Richland County and each kit included a parent guide and materials to help grow important early literacy skills (tripartite model: intellectual access, physical access).

In addition to seeking reading support, parents and caregivers found themselves trying to prepare lessons from home using the South Carolina Education Standards. The Studio supported this with their Education Studio's SC Standards blog¹¹, written in parent-friendly language and including premade lessons and booklists (tripartite model: intellectual access). Richland Library also created a dedicated page on their website¹² to help support caregivers and educators

navigating their new learning environments, as well as creating a Facebook group where ideas and resources were shared (tripartite model: intellectual access, social access). Richland Library's Education Studio is gearing up for more virtual programs, including parent reading workshops via Zoom and distributing additional resources throughout the community in the Summer of 2021.

Services for Social Justice and Civic Engagement

During the Summer of 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement led to a global focus on social injustice based on race and systemic oppression. One event Richland Library designed to support community engagement in social justice was a virtual teen panel which gave teens a safe place to unpack their reactions to world events by talking about their own experiences (tripartite model: social access). A landing page on the Library's website¹³ was curated to provide community members with resources to understand and discuss topics of race, equity and inclusion (tripartite model: intellectual access, physical access).

Public libraries in many cities today take an active role in fostering civic engagement (Edwards et al., 2013; Kranich, 2005). Two significant U.S. civic engagement events that occurred during the pandemic was the 2020 U.S. Census and the 2020 presidential election. In response to these events, Richland Library established two short-term Priority Service groups to inform and assist citizens regarding completing the census and voting in the election (tripartite model: physical access, intellectual access). Among several projects, the Census Participation Team created and staffed a dedicated phone line to answer questions and provide assistance; conducted a census-themed story time that was broadcast on the Library's Facebook page; and participated in local and regional phone and text banks (tripartite model: social access).

Also, a Voter Participation Team compiled a master list of municipal, county, state, and federal election information, recruited 22 staff members to train and work as poll managers (for whom they also created care packages), and conducted a Virtual Voter Registration Drive (tripartite model: intellectual access, physical access). They also collaborated with the Census Participation Team to write a series of civic engagement tips for the library's social media channels (tripartite model: intellectual access). All open locations distributed informational flyers and absentee ballots through holds pick-up and both teams published pertinent blog posts on the library's website with topics including Privacy & the Census; Latinos/as, Hispanics, LatinX in the Census; How to Vote Absentee; and First Time Voter: 2020 Elections & COVID-19. In addition, the library sponsored a virtual Civic Engagement Tele-Town Hall¹⁴ that garnered 871 participants (tripartite model: intellectual access, physical access, social access).

Services for Health and Safety

In the beginning of the pandemic, it was clear that people experiencing homelessness in the community would need additional support. With shelters no longer taking in individuals and public parks closed, many homeless citizens did not have access to restrooms or sanitizing stations. The main library of the Richland Library system is positioned in downtown Columbia, South Carolina, where in 2019, the staff serviced as many as 819 people experiencing homelessness. To ensure the public health of this patron community, Richland Library placed handwashing stations and portable toilets around the exterior of the building, as an accommodation due to the closed status of library buildings during the height of the pandemic

(Trainor, 2020). Richland Library also deployed eight of its hand sanitizing stands with refills to local organizations that serve individuals experiencing homelessness.

Online public health resources provided on the Richland Library Coronavirus Resources & Information blog¹⁵ outlined various local and global organizations and information about where residents could get tested and, eventually, vaccinated (tripartite model: intellectual access). Through continued partnerships, Richland Library worked with the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (SCDHEC) to provide an outdoor space for COVID-19 testing at two library locations in designated high-risk communities. Staff were able to volunteer during work hours for shifts at active vaccination sites, assisting users with registration to receive the COVID-19 vaccine (tripartite model: intellectual access, social access).

Lastly, although library spaces were closed for several months, the public library was still a place Library customers thought of when planning their outdoor, socially distanced meetings. A wide range of requests were made such as permissions to hold memorials for deceased friends and family members or to host church services in library parking lot spaces. Although the Library was not able to accommodate these requests because of social distancing and security protocols, the fact that the requests were even made shows that public libraries are considered important physical locations in the community for gathering during times of crisis.

Discussion and Analysis of These Changes to Library Services

Times of social crisis can be periods of stopping and retrenching but they can also be times of growth and revitalization (Reed & Thompson, 2021). The IFLA 2020 Statement's call for libraries to ensure physical (Everyone Connected), intellectual (Everyone Enabled) and social (Everyone Informed) access to services and digital inclusion encourages libraries to look for ways to take advantage of the digital technologies available to recreate library services to creatively meet the needs of the communities served.

The previous section provided a narrative account of changes to Richland Library services that responded to the emerging needs during the COVID-19 pandemic year. The following table provides a breakdown of the services outlined in the narrative. This section will provide discussion and analysis.

Table 1. Richland Library and the Tripartite Model

	Physical access and digital inclusion (IFLA: Everyone Connected)	Intellectual access and digital inclusion (IFLA: Everyone Enabled)	Social access and digital inclusion (IFLA: Everyone Informed)
General Services			
Augmented Spanish language services	NA	Intellectual access	Social access
Expand publisher contracts/policies	Physical access	NA	NA
Personalized reading recommendations	NA	Intellectual access	Social access

Online check-out; drive-thru and curbside pickup	Physical access	NA	NA
Directional signage for health and safety	NA	Intellectual access	Social access
Services for Small Businesses and Entrepreneurs			
Expanded small business supports including grant and loan resources	Physical access	Intellectual access	Social access
Collaborative programming and community engagement supports	NA	NA	Social access
Job search and unemployment assistance	Physical access	NA	NA
Billboards advertising new services	NA	Intellectual access	NA
Facebook groups and Zoom programs for small business expert supports	NA	Intellectual access	Social access
Library's Entrepreneur in Residence	Physical access	NA	NA
Services for Students and Home Learning			
Education Studio support for parents with at-home schooling	Physical access	Intellectual access	Social access
Preliteracy classes for struggling readers; Lexia Core 5, All about Reading Curriculum	Physical access	Intellectual access	Social access
Facebook support group for home schooling, sharing ideas	NA	Intellectual access	Social access
Services for Social Justice and Civic Engagement			
Resources to learn about and discuss topics of race, equity, and inclusion	Physical access	Intellectual access	Social access
Support to complete 2020 US Census; civic engagement tips and Tele-Town Hall	Physical access	Intellectual access	Social access
Socializing voting registration; Virtual Voter Registration Drive	Physical access	Intellectual access	Social access
Services for Health and Safety			
Physical resources to support individuals experiencing homelessness	Physical access	NA	Social access
COVID-19 testing information blitz and socialization; volunteer hours at testing sites	NA	Intellectual access	Social access

Physical access to information and digital inclusion: Everyone Connected

As noted in the sections above, physical modifications to library services were needed to continue to meet user needs and expectations. While no-touch service was important, this could sometimes be translated into digital-only from-home service, but sometimes needed to be low-touch in-person service. The Library's website was revised and updated daily to ensure

that users and potential users could stay connected and meet their information needs. New physical services that were not on the horizon before COVID-19 include QR “Quick Response” codes scannable with mobile phones for mobile self-checkout, curbside pick-up at every branch, more drive-thru options than were previously available such as printing pickup, socially distanced in-house browsing, and a new array of digital services. Digital connections with health, safety, and civic community service providers helped ensure community members could stay connected with Wi-Fi, websites, and phone-help when needed. Next steps might be to further explore physical access issues, including which pockets of the community do not have access to school or workplace devices.

When it comes to digital access, the goal of public libraries is not necessarily to ensure that all individuals own devices, but rather to ensure *access* to needed information and communication technology infrastructures to be able to meet local information and social inclusion needs. This access might involve loaning tablets or other devices to library users, being in partnerships within the community (e.g., schools, civic centers, health services, businesses), or by providing computer labs in community spaces beyond library walls. These kinds of decisions will depend on the funding and resources available to the library itself, and the connections with, and support provided by the local community.

Intellectual access to information and digital inclusion: Everyone Enabled

Richland Library built bridges to reach members of the community with low or no online skills by creating services to support intellectual access to information and emerging infrastructures. These services included career coaching and small business help over the phone, social work appointments to assist users navigating the changing economic and business landscape, voting and census training and support mechanisms. School and parenting support allowed broader access to digital educational tools, and reader’s advisory teams expanded personalized recommendations for at-home reading.

Government interventions related to the pandemic have led to government paperwork and processes that are new to users and sometimes are processes that have never been seen before. Next steps for Richland Library might be to have additional training for navigating government assistance such as the Emergency Rental Assistance Program and SCDEW applications, and health literacy training. There are visible equity issues in the community that will also need consideration, including language-based disparities (i.e., materials and services offered in a limited number of languages). Public libraries can play a critical role in providing the training and outreach needed to ensure an informed and engaged populace during times of crisis, and help meet the communication needs between government and residents.

Social access to information and digital inclusion: Everyone Informed

Socially, Richland Library built community by expanding their use of social media with Facebook Groups and other Facebook features, blogs, and virtual gathering activities such as story times and study groups. To keep Richland Library’s blog on the cutting edge, the Library’s administration team tripled the number of staff members trained to post on the blog, leading to blog posts with tips for what to do from home during shutdowns, book recommendations, reading lists, mental health supports, BrainBreaks for students, racial injustice and a civil unrest safe space. This also meant Library staff needed to have clear discussion about how to provide robust information services, while still preserving the privacy and security of library

staff members (e.g., returning phone tree calls from home but in a way that would not disclose a staff member's personal phone number; engaging with social media on a personal level, but without providing access to one's personal social media groups unwittingly). As noted above, Richland County has a Hispanic minority population of about 5.3% of the county's population, or 21,500 people (U. S. Census, 2019). Richland Library has come a long way in providing more Spanish-language services and resources via their Facebook page, but there is still a long way to go. Pre-recorded closing announcements at the end of the day are now made in both English and Spanish and the Spanish-speaking employees of the Library are designing additional programs and services that will meet the social needs of Spanish-speaking members of the community.

Reflections and Conclusion

When making decisions about service changes during times of social crisis or change, physical access may often be the first layer of access we think of: getting laptops and Wi-Fi to patrons, resource lending, and allowing users back into the building. While physical access is vital to library use, intellectual and social access and inclusion cannot be overlooked. When considering which is more difficult or more important, the answer is that all three are needed for full access and digital inclusion. Through this analysis of the physical, intellectual, and social needs met by Richland Library during the COVID-19 shutdowns and social-distancing period, we argue this tripartite model can be used to help public libraries ensure they are meeting the appropriate array of user needs during times of crisis and sudden social change, thus responding to the IFLA 2020 Statement for the Commission on Social Development. A too-tight focus on physical access could ignore the need for training and social supports; a skewed focus on social aspects may overlook physical and intellectual needs; and similarly, over-concentration on intellectual aspects could ignore physical and social needs. This tripartite model can help decision makers evaluate the services they already offer and analyze whether they are building a well-balanced structure to support digital inclusion in the community and meet the needs including but not limited to the specific digital inclusion topics listed in the IFLA 2020 statement.

It is also very important that we note that all these decisions were made by on-the-ground and behind-the-scenes staff members, including but not limited to managers, support staff, the marketing department, the social work department, the library experience team, and so many others who gave time, expertise, and talent to designing and redesigning services and processes as the 2020-2021 experiences unfolded. Evaluation was a daily experience during this time of unexpected change, as was innovation and preparation, flexibility, and willingness to collaborate with new partners and make new connections. Meeting the needs of the whole service population, including typically marginalized and situationally excluded Library users, by offering robust, timely, and responsive library services was the vision of Richland Library and led decision-making throughout the 2020-2021 pandemic experience.

Endnotes

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/infectioncontrol/guidelines/index.html>

² <https://www.ala.org/alcts/preservationweek/resources/pandemic>

- ³ <https://www.richlandlibrary.com/employment-small-businesses-help>
- ⁴ <https://www.richlandlibrary.com/business-careers-and-research-center>
- ⁵ <https://www.richlandlibrary.com/studio-services>
- ⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/RichlandLibrary/groups/>
- ⁷ <https://www.richlandlibrary.com/work-for-us/entrepreneur-residence>
- ⁸ <https://www.richlandlibrary.com/educationstudio>
- ⁹ <https://www.lexialearning.com/products/core5>
- ¹⁰ <https://www.allaboutlearningpress.com/all-about-reading/>
- ¹¹ <https://www.richlandlibrary.com/educationstudio>
- ¹² <https://www.richlandlibrary.com/educators>
- ¹³ <https://www.richlandlibrary.com/race>
- ¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FZbcM1CVwuw>
- ¹⁵ <https://www.richlandlibrary.com/blog/2020-03-03/coronavirus-resources-information>

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