

BOBCATSSS 2010

UNIVERSITY OF PARMA - 25th - 27th January, 2010

BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE: LIBRARIES PROVIDING ACCESS FOR ALL?

INTRODUCTION TO THE CONFERENCE THEME

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Dear colleagues, opening this Bobcatss conference 2010, I would like to make a short reflection on the theme of this symposium, the digital divide, that is part, or better, maybe could be considered a digital status of the broader information and knowledge access divide.

Normally, when we think of digital divide we mainly think of a technology gap, we think of developing countries' people, students and scholars who don't have IT resources or equipments or Infrastructures to access to the Net and to manage produce and access the information and knowledge that are published there, or we think of incomers from these countries that live in such condition which doesn't allow simply to connect to the Net, besides we know that the divide can be based also on other several differences, on gender, disabilities, race, sex, religion, censorship and so forth.

But the divide can come also from the unawareness of the information needs, and the lack of knowledge of means and sources:

- there are people that don't have the technology to access information and knowledge;
- there are people that have the technology, but aren't able to use it, that is elderly people and non-digital natives;
- there are people that have the technology and are able to use it, but can't afford the cost to access information and knowledge resources.

All these people have information and knowledge needs.

The digital, information and knowledge access divide is not only a technological issue which developing countries are concerned with, it's an actual problem for the so called developed countries as well, because a large part of people don't know the existence of digital information and knowledge, or don't know how to reach, use or find it, sometimes misusing such information.

The divide is mainly a cultural and social problem.

In all these cases, libraries can represent a solution, a point where the people can bridge these gaps and, through the planning of information literacy and lifelong learning programs, give people means to access and find information, the awareness to know, choose and evaluate sources and knowledge.

This is the mediating role which libraries have always had, between the people information and knowledge needs and the recorded information and knowledge, regardless of the medium used.

The digital status, due to the growth of the technology, highlight this usual mediating role of libraries, because the gap between people and knowledge is wider and more evident.

So the answer to the question mark that is in the conference title, in my opinion is positive, libraries can "bridge the divide", every kind of divide, be it cultural, information, knowledge or digital divide, because they have been doing this since their arising, because this is library's mission.

Looking at the very high level of the presentations you are going to deliver, in these days we'll see how libraries can fulfil their mission and how libraries can provide access to knowledge for many different types of readers. I assure you that I'd like to be able to attend all the parallel sessions contemporarily.

The BOBCATSSS conference is sponsored by EUCLID (European Association for Library & Information Education and Research - <http://euclid-lis.org/>), Association of independent non-governmental and non-profit European School of Library and Information Science, held annually in one of the premises of the member universities. This year the conference is hosted by the University of Parma and coordinated by the Universities of Manchester (Metropolitan), Parma and Milan, but

the conference is utterly organized and managed by these universities LIS students and it is completely dedicated to present the studies and research of LIS students from all over the world. So it is a conference organized by LIS students, devoted to LIS students, and the scientific committee that students formed together with the teachers did a formidable job, in a very short time, in planning and organizing the conference, in evaluating and selecting the papers admitted, and in welcoming and making feel at home their colleagues coming from around the world. Here I would like to thank the students with whom I was honored to collaborate in organizing this conference, and the colleagues Anna Maria Tammaro and Bob Glass, for asking me to participate and for their outstanding work in driving students activities and decisions, without which this conference could not take place. Finally I would like to thank the keynote speakers, the Chairs of the several conference sessions and the public, who stressed with their presence the significance of this conference.