

De-myth-tifying the Gender Digital Divide in Latin America: Libraries as Intermediaries in Bridging the Gap

Abstract: For decades, the gender digital divide has existed as a concept and a construct throughout countries all over the world. It persists with particular belligerence in areas like Latin America, where myths surrounding its existence have perpetuated disparities in men's and women's access to and use of the internet and information and communications technologies (ICTs). In this paper, the author reveals that in order for the gender digital divide to be rectified, it must first be 'de-myth-tified', and claims about the divide as nonexistent, unimportant, or due to women's inherent technophobia systematically discredited. It is then argued that, by exposing the true nature of the divide, spaces are created for libraries to take on a new role in Latin America, as advocates for gender equality in technology and information. Possibilities for improving policy, education, and innovation are explored, with a call for further research in the field.

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Introduction

In a global knowledge economy, where information is currency and wallets are digital, access has become everything. While many have heralded the rapid development and proliferation of the Internet and information and communications technologies as the universal equalizers of information access, this has not yet proven to be the case. Instead, the implementation of these technologies has often favored certain populations and places over others, causing an uneven distribution that has left pockets of people disconnected and uninformed. This is especially true in developing countries where, to make matters worse, these patterns of inequality are often shrouded by misconceptions and myths surrounding their origins, causing the systems to be perpetuated.

In Latin American and Caribbean countries, a myth-laden gap in information and technology access between men and women has become normalized, permitting cultural disparities to persist for decades in what has become known as the gender digital divide. 'De-myth-tifying' this divide, however, allows for a critical examination of the truths behind its existence, and in doing so creates new opportunities for intermediaries to bridge the gap. With the potential both to facilitate information access and digital literacy instruction, and to also gather data exposing and dispelling these myths, it is argued that libraries could prove most effective in this role, and thus revolutionize the Latin American landscape of information management.

Conceptualizing the Gender Digital Divide

As pervasive in the world as it is today, the concept of the gender digital divide can be quite difficult to define, as it is made up of distinct parts. Traditionally, the phrase "digital divide" refers to an unequal distribution of information and communications technologies, resulting in a gap between those who are able to access digital information, and thus participate in the information or knowledge society, and those who are not (Purushothaman & Zhou, 2014). With increases in visibility and scholarship surrounding this issue, the past several decades have given rise to more nuanced definitions of the digital divide, incorporating considerations not only of access, with its physical and skills related barriers, but also of the use and production of information and communications technologies (ICTs) (Parmentier & Huyer, 2008; Antonio & Tuffley, 2014), as well as the communication of digital information (Hilbert, 2011).

Additionally, in developing regions of the world, this gap often reflects gender role constructs that are deeply rooted in longstanding sociocultural traditions of inequality

(Hilbert, 2011; Antonio & Tuffley, 2014). In Latin America and the Caribbean, these patriarchal values are known as *machismo*, which encompasses a range of attitudes and behaviours, from the expectations placed on women to be obliging and submissive to the authority and dominance of men, to the systematic disadvantaging of women and girls from equal opportunities in education, employment, and earning an income (Bull, 2013). Due to this cultural gender imbalance, fewer Latin American women have accessed and used the Internet and ICTs than men, resulting in a gender digital divide (Hilbert, 2011; Antonio & Tuffley, 2014).

De-myth-tifying the Disparity

Between these nuanced definitions and cultural confounders, it is unsurprising that the gender digital divide has been characterized and perpetuated in Latin America and the Caribbean by a considerable number of misconceptions and myths. Before these can be properly addressed, however, it is important to first establish why the divide merits such careful consideration. In the simplest sense, the gender gap in digital information access is significant because of the well-documented potential transformative power of the Internet and ICTs (see Bonder, 2002; Parmentier & Huyer, 2008; Hilbert, 2011; Antonio & Tuffley, 2014; Purushothaman & Zhou, 2014). In the broadest sense, ICTs can facilitate the participation of individuals, communities, and countries in the information society and knowledge economy (Garrido & Roman, 2006; Antonio & Tuffley, 2014; Purushothaman & Zhou, 2014). When harnessed by a collective, digital technologies can facilitate community building, political organization, and grassroots advocacy efforts (Garrido & Roman, 2006; Hilbert, 2011). These technologies can also generate new employment opportunities, by connecting entrepreneurs to the wider world of e-commerce and providing them with opportunities for increased productivity and income (Hilbert, 2011; Antonio & Tuffley, 2014).

These potential benefits are particularly appealing for regions currently struggling with economic and social development goals. In Latin America, which is comprised of the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking countries found throughout the Americas and the Caribbean, Mexico is often singled out for having “the highest level of socioeconomic inequality of any region in the world” (Parmentier & Huyer, 2008, p. 15). This led researchers with the United Nations Development Programme and Inter-American Development Bank to conclude that, “development cannot progress in Latin America without addressing the root causes of the country’s inequality”, many of which are gender-based (Parmentier & Huyer, 2008, p. 15). This imbalance is especially troubling because women arguably have more to gain from the transformative power of the

internet and ICTs than men do, given the former's "lower starting point" both socioeconomically and culturally (Hilbert, 2011, p. 481; Antonio & Tuffley, 2014, p. 676). Since the internet and digital technologies have transformative development potential, and since "[r]educing poverty, reducing economic disparity, and raising the status of women are all interrelated" (Parmentier & Huyer, 2008, p. 15), dispelling the myths surrounding the gender digital divide is therefore crucial, not only to further gender equality, but to ensure Latin America's sustainable socioeconomic development on the whole.

The Insignificance Myth

Interestingly enough, the first of the myths perpetuating the gender digital divide in Latin America is the idea that it is not something to be concerned about at all. Recent developments in the region are partly to blame for this misconception. Latin America boasts one of the fastest internet expansions of any area in the world, including more developed countries. Despite beginning the new millennium with less than 4% of its population connected to the internet, Latin America experienced a 136% growth rate in hosts between 1999 and 2001 (Bonder, 2002), and between 2000 and 2005, internet usage in the region grew by an unprecedented 160% (Garrido & Roman, 2006). At the same time, significant progress has been made in improving the status of Latin American women, with increased numbers of female representatives in government and other traditionally male-dominated arenas (Garrido & Roman, 2006).

The consequent lessening of both the gender and digital divides in this region has led some to conclude that it is no longer a pressing matter. When Chen and Wellman (2003) observed that, in 2002, "Forty-two percent of Internet users in Mexico were women," rather than use this information to demonstrate the persistence of gender disparities, they concluded that, "There is not much of a gender divide" (p. 20). Based on a simple comparison of numbers alone, this reasoning is arguably sound. However, when these numbers measure inconsistencies in the quality of life and opportunities experienced by different groups of individuals, disregarding such inequalities has encouraged the depreciation of their importance, and allowed them to persist (Huyer & Sikoska, 2003).

The perception that the gender digital divide in developing regions like Latin America is inconsequential has also been reinforced by its startling lack of visibility. In their literature review on the subject, Antonio and Tuffley (2014) conclude that more research is desperately needed in order to better understand gender disparities in technology usage, as well as why these gender disparities persist in so many countries. Their declaration echoes the sentiment of many others, who assert that the divide itself

cannot be bridged until gaps in the research are closed (Huyer & Sikoska, 2003; Hilbert, 2011). At present, almost no empirical studies have been conducted on the gender digital divide, and governments and international companies, institutions, and organizations have been responsible for most of the research in the field (Antonio & Tuffley, 2014). With such scant and in many cases one-dimensional information on the gender digital divide, the realities of the situation have oftentimes been overlooked or skewed to support a different narrative.

Further adding to misconceptions about the existence and significance of a gender information gap in Latin America is the lack of adequate statistical data about digital technology access and usage. Antonio and Tuffley (2014) note that, commonly, “[f]ew statistics on gender and ICT are available because many governments do not collect ICT statistics and rarely are they disaggregated by sex” (p. 676). As a result, international bodies, like the United Nations Telecommunications Union, have been responsible for producing most of the statistics on the Latin American divide (Hilbert, 2011). These initiatives are limited in value, however, because they do not provide household or gender-specific usage information (Hilbert, 2011). On the other hand, while the Digital Opportunity Index (DOI) does incorporate household data into their assessments, they fail to distinguish between “opportunity of access and actual use of the Internet” (Antonio & Tuffley, 2014, p. 677), which are far from synonymous.

To this end, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) have collaborated in recent years through the Observatory for the Information Society in Latin America and the Caribbean (OSILAC) (Hilbert, 2011). OSILAC has successfully incorporated ICT indicators into national-level household surveys in an effort to generate more information about the gender digital divide in the region (Hilbert, 2011). It is currently estimated that 17% of Latin American women use the Internet regularly (Hilbert, 2011), and that they constitute 38% of users in general (Antonio & Tuffley, 2014). Although these numbers are approximations at best, they do shed light on both the existence and gravity of the gender digital divide in Latin America, and work to discredit the prevailing misconception that it is otherwise.

The Technophobia Myth

While the previous myth about the insignificance of the gender digital divide persists because of a lack of information to the contrary, other misconceptions that perpetuate digital disparities are far more explicit. Traditional discourses in developing countries have often purported that it is natural for women to use technology less than men, because they are inherently technophobic and because ICTs do not meet their

needs as adequately as they do men's. Technophobia, as defined by Rosen and Weil, is "anxiety about current or future interactions with computers or computer-related technology, negative global attitudes about computers...and/or specific negative cognitions or self-critical internal dialogues during computer interaction" (1990, as cited by Purushothaman & Zhou, 2014, p. 371). In the 1990s, Western researchers investigating the digital divide argued that this set of fears and negative attitudes were naturally characteristic of women in general, and ascribed to them "a certain computer anxiety" (Hilbert, 2011, p. 480). This gave rise to a binary model of digital technology access and use, in which men are considered more eager and tech-savvy, while women are viewed as decidedly technophobic (Hilbert, 2011; Sadler & Bourg, 2015). This "pernicious narrative...makes women's exclusion seem natural and expected, and therefore a problem unworthy of addressing" (Oldenziel, 2004, as cited by Sadler & Bourg, 2015, Participation and Ecology in the production of technology section, para. 3).

In recent years, although its psychological aspects have not yet been thoroughly studied in developing contexts (Purushothaman & Zhou, 2014), technophobia has been liberally applied to women in other countries around the world (Hilbert, 2011; Antonio & Tuffley, 2014). Proponents of this view argue that, due to their natural disadvantage, it should be expected that women will benefit less from the Internet and ICTs available in their communities (Hilbert, 2011; Antonio & Tuffley, 2014). This is reflected in the vocabulary employed by governments, heads of state, and international organizations, which often discuss solutions to the gender digital divide in developing countries in terms of capacity building (see Melhem, Tandon, & Morrell, 2009; Hilbert, 2011; Doria, 2015). Such language use is dangerous, however, because it implies that women are less digitally capable than men (Hilbert, 2011), and frames the gender digital divide in terms of a female deficiency, thus perpetuating disparities based on their "natural" occurrence.

At the same time that these technophobic arguments have been transferred to women living in developing regions, studies are emerging which dispel these claims of inherent female disadvantage and fear as little more than myth. Antonio and Tuffley (2014) demonstrate in their review of the literature that "women have the capacity, and in many cases the desire, to engage more fully with ICTs" but are held back by "a range of socio-cultural reasons, for example traditional ideas of the place of women in society" (Conclusions section, para. 1). For example, they found that Internet and ICT usage among highly educated women in developing countries is on par with that of similarly educated men, "refuting the assertion that it is a lack of capacity that causes women to otherwise not use the Internet" (Antonio & Tuffley, 2014, p. 677).

In Latin America, this difference between the myth and reality of female technophobia was discovered to be even more drastic through a study conducted by Martin Hilbert in 2011. While analyzing statistics about men's and women's access to and usage of the Internet and ICTs, he controlled for what he termed the "confounding variables" of unequal access to education and employment (2011, p. 3). This simple yet revolutionary measure revealed that, given the same opportunities as men, Latin American women would not only make equal use of information and communications technologies, but that they would in fact use them more (Hilbert, 2011). These findings established that "longstanding gender-related inequalities are the reason for less usage", which "is very different from arguing that women are naturally technophobic" (Hilbert, 2011, p. 8). The distinction is especially important because the term "technophobia" has been misappropriated within local Latin American discourses, and used to describe the effects of ingrained cultural values on women's relationship with technology (Garrido & Roman, 2006). This use of language associated with inherent gender differences to explain disparities acknowledged to be culturally enforced, or in other words, using the wrong word to describe the right trigger, is further evidence that technophobia among Latin American women is a persistent idea, but a myth nonetheless.

The Incompatibility Myth

A variation on this theme has alleged that women are likewise not suited to use the Internet and the ICTs made available to them. Employing language similar to that of the proponents of technophobia, this argument claims that women are at a "natural disadvantage" when it comes to digital technologies because it "is not built for their needs and intuition" (Hilbert, 2011, p. 3). Supporters of this view emphasize the male-centricity of Internet and ICT content (Antonio & Tuffley, 2014), including in Latin America, where software and hardware applications associated with new technologies have rarely reflected female users' desires or interests (Hilbert, 2011). From these observations that technology "has often implicitly been designed to meet the needs of men, not of women" (Hilbert, 2011, p.7) and the depictions of women in the media as less interested in technology in general (Huyer & Sikoska, 2003), it has been inferred that ICTs and women are incompatible, and therefore that a digital divide between the genders is to be expected.

The problem with this argument, however, is that it is based upon reasoning that is decidedly circular and dissociated from the cultural context. Historically, in Latin America and other developing regions, women have been systematically excluded from entering science and technology related fields, including web programming and

design (Parmentier & Huyer, 2008), and have had less access to technological skills training (Antonio & Tuffley, 2014). As noted by the Gender Advisory Board of the United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development (GAB-UNCSTD), these unbalanced opportunities “have led to unequal technology development and transfer in which men have benefitted more than women” (Parmentier & Huyer, 2008). In Latin America, this is due in large part to the persistence of traditional sociocultural gender roles, in which the “‘hard sciences’, like engineering, still have a tendency to be viewed as masculine” (Parmentier & Huyer, 2008 p. 17). The perceived lack of digital content relevant to women in these regions can therefore be traced back directly to their limited involvement in science and technology related fields, rather than to their natural incompatibility with the technology itself.

Dispelling this myth that women and technology are not suited to one another is a necessary first step in Latin American women experiencing the full range of benefits that the Internet and ICTs have to offer. This is because barring women from taking on careers in science and technology has also prevented them from becoming producers of digital content. Huyer and Hafkin (2006) distinguish between the two roles in the following way:

A user is one who can find and obtain information for particular tasks and purposes. A producer...is fluent in the uses of technology; comfortable using and designing technology and communication equipment, software, and can work well in virtual spaces. She is an active knowledge creator and designs information and knowledge systems, software, and hardware (as cited by Parmentier & Huyer, 2008, p. 14).

The contribution of women as producers is especially crucial in regions like Latin America, where half of the population are women, who often “hold the key to certain knowledge and processes” not found elsewhere (Parmentier & Huyer, 2008). The increased skill sets associated with digital technology and content production furthermore facilitate individuals’ participation in creative decision-making processes about technology design, development, adaptation, and implementation (Parmentier & Huyer, 2008). Such processes have the potential to either rectify or reinforce systemic sociocultural and economic disparities between the genders in Latin America (Parmentier & Huyer, 2008), and so it is essential that women are involved. Perpetuating the misconception that women and digital technologies are naturally incompatible prevents the former from contributing to the knowledge society, detracts from the latter’s potential usefulness, and obscures the gender imbalances in education, skills training, and employment opportunities at the root of it all.

The Policy Myth

Akin to these instances, in which misinterpreting observed trends has perpetuated the gender digital divide, another common misconception is that the current policies and initiatives in Latin America are adequately addressing the needs of women and working to close the existing gap. To a degree, there is evidence that this is true. The United Nations, for example, operates the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the *Mujer, Ciencia y Tecnología en América Latina* UNESCO initiative within the region (Parmentier & Huyer, 2008), both of which aim to monitor and mediate the gender digital divide. As mentioned earlier, out of partnership between the IDRC and ECLAC, OSILAC has worked to incorporate gender considerations into regional statistical data collection (Hilbert, 2011). Other multinational initiatives, such as the Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM) and the Inter-American Committee on Science and Technology (COMCYT), have been established to ensure gender equity in Latin American programs and policies, and in recent years, international policy makers have advocated for “integrating gender perspectives and awareness in all aspects and at all levels of public policymaking” (Parmentier & Huyer, 2008, p. 16).

Given the number of working groups and initiatives in the region, most of which have been active for several decades, it is tempting to conclude as many have done that policy and projects in Latin America are thoroughly addressing the gender digital divide, and that it is therefore not a cause for concern (see Melhem, et al. 2009; Hilbert, 2011; Doria, 2015). Other researchers caution, however, that existence should not be equated with effectiveness. Although some organizations have met with success, “overall, implementation of the gender recommendations—and commitment within the region—is inconsistent” (Parmentier & Huyer, 2008, p. 18), while governments consistently fail to acknowledge sociocultural gender inequalities or provide appropriate public policy (Bonder, 2002). In her analysis of regional meetings on ICT policy, Bonder furthermore notes that gender considerations are minimally present in discussions, and continue “to be added in the recommendations in a very weak way” (2002, p. 5). ECLAC, for example, makes no reference at all to gender in a series of otherwise progressive recommendations for the equitable integration of ICTs in Latin America, an omission reflected in the documentation of many other mainstream organizations (Bonder, 2002). Bonder concludes that “this confirms that the general concern for ICT policies and the debates on gender issues seem to run along parallel roads,” (2002, p. 15), permitting the gender digital divide to persist in the region.

It should be noted here that, despite her rather scathing review of these international development organizations, Bonder's review was published back in 2002, making it now over a decade old. A potential implication of this is that her critique, while justified at the time, might no longer accurately reflect measures that ECLAC and other bodies have taken to incorporate considerations of gender and especially women's needs into policy and decision-making activities. However, much like the paucity of research that has perpetuated the divide itself, a lack recent work to evaluate these organizations has resulted in a scarcity of information from which to draw a firm conclusion about the usefulness or value of their efforts. In either case, the fact remains that equating the existence of these groups in the region with their effectiveness in reducing the gender digital divide is a problematic and misleading practice.

A ready response to the seeming lack of consideration being given to issues of gender equality in developing ICT policy is for women to be included in these processes. As noted before with ICT and digital content production, however, female participation in decision-making can be difficult to facilitate, especially at the political level. In Latin America, one of the key obstacles to women's involvement in policy development is a lack of accessible, usable public information (Huyer & Sikoska, 2003). Women arguably have a thorough understanding of the failure of current ICT policy and practices to meet their needs, and possess valuable insights into how the gender gap could be effectively bridged. However, as traditional political channels have often been closed to them (Garrido & Roman, 2006), in order to advocate for change, women must organize independently, using public information accessible only via the Internet (Huyer & Sikoska, 2003).

Honing their focus on Costa Rica and Nicaragua in 2002, Martinez and Reilly discovered that public and state officials often handle such information with ownership (Huyer & Sikoska, 2003), yielding "a political culture which is disrespectful of the right of civil society to information" (Bonder, 2002, p. 12). If they do gain access, the documents retrieved are often complex, lengthy, and worded in specialized language and terminology, rendering them unfit for use by those who need them most (Huyer & Sikoska, 2003). Martinez and Reilly conclude that this lack of accessible public information "makes it harder for women to promote policy changes" (as cited by Bonder, 2002, p. 13). Thus, by muffling dissenting voices, the misconception is perpetuated that existing ICT policies and implementation practices are adequately meeting the needs of women.

The Role of Libraries in Bridging the Gap

Recognizing and dispelling these myths surrounding the gender digital divide allows not only for a better conceptualization of the existing issues, but also for the development of plausible next steps. Discrediting such misconceptions exposes a series of needs that must be addressed before gender equality can be achieved in Latin America. These needs include increases in sex-disaggregated statistical information about the digital divide, improved educational and training prospects for women, and changes in ICT policy to reflect considerations of gender. In each of these cases, the unique specifications of these needs can be mapped directly to the services and skillsets offered by libraries, allowing the latter to be cast as an agent of change and viable intermediary in bridging the gender digital divide.

Libraries as Information Gatherers

First, a need for further and better research into the divide, especially in the form of sex-disaggregated statistics, has been identified as instrumental in refuting the myth that gender disparities in digital technology access and use are nonexistent or insubstantial. While government bodies and NGOs have made some progress on this front so far (see Hilbert, 2011), efforts have been slow and employ a top-down approach that may not accurately reflect women's everyday lived experiences at the grassroots level. This situation is in many ways a call for public-access centres to get involved in data collection processes.

In Latin America, public-access centres take one of three forms: libraries, cybercafés, or telecentres (Gomez, Ambikar, & Coward, 2009), where a telecentre is “a public place where people can find information, create, learn, and communicate with other while developing digital skills through access to information and communication technology” (Telecentre Foundation, 2016). As providers of physical access to the Internet and ICTs, these public centres are ideally situated to collect sex-disaggregated data and generate relevant statistical information about user interactions with digital technologies. Libraries are arguably the best suited to performing this task. While telecentres and cybercafés serve first and foremost as access points, libraries integrate a broader range of information management services into their institutional model. Trained librarians, for example, possess various skills in organization and communication that make them well equipped to perform data collection to represent their patron base while also respecting user rights to privacy. Such statistics, if sex-disaggregated, would also reflect a different user demographic than is normally captured in national surveys, as the latter predicates measures of ICT

usage on the presence of such devices in the home (Hilbert, 2011), disregarding the access of women who do not own the digital technologies they use.

Libraries as Instructors and Educators

Additionally, libraries are ideally suited to bridge the gap between men's and women's access to and use of the Internet and ICTs through instruction and education. In determining that Latin American women are not at a natural disadvantage, being neither inherently technophobic nor incompatible with information technologies, it has likewise been confirmed that women experience unequal opportunities in education, employment, and the production of ICTs and digital content. While regional initiatives are being undertaken to improve women's representation in the fields of science, technology, and engineering (Parmentier & Huyer, 2008), the persisting disparity requires action from local public institutions. Although community-based telecentres are often championed over libraries as the preferred points of access (see Gomez, Ambikar, & Coward, 2009; Gomez, & Gould, 2010), testimonies from women have revealed that "without explicitly addressing the needs of women users, telecentres...do not achieve their objectives of providing access to technology to communities and women in particular" (Huyer & Sikoska, 2003, p. 19). With telecentres struggling to provide equal and equitable opportunities of access to and use of the internet and ICTs, the reintroduction of libraries into the equation as suitable collaborative partners becomes increasingly desirable.

In recent years, the greater availability of digital resources and the increase in patron needs related to information technologies have prompted libraries all over the world to move "beyond library-as-repository to become centres supporting teaching and learning" (Ariew, 2014), with some positing that "the most important educational function of physical library space is to foster a culture of intentional learning" (Bennett, 2009, as cited by Ariew, 2014, p. 201). In Latin America, however, telecentres are far more active than libraries in instruction, offering lessons in basic computer use, digital communication education, and technical skills training in software and hardware installation and maintenance (Garrido & Roman, 2006). While some of these centres demonstrate a concern for women's needs in their praxis, as Garrido and Roman (2006) have found, "we have no way of knowing how prevalent such centres are in the region" (p. 175). In this way, an opportunity is created for Latin American libraries to join the ranks of their contemporaries, by supporting and enhancing educational programming in collaboration with local telecentres, in order to specifically target the needs of women, and thereby work to bridge this digital divide.

In addition to collaborative instruction, opportunities have arisen for libraries and other public-access centres in Latin America to facilitate women's technological innovation and digital content creation. Enter, makerspaces. Although definitions vary, makerspaces are "creative, DIY spaces where people can gather to create, invent, and learn" and that "often have 3D printers, software, electronics, craft and hardware supplies and tools" (Kroski, 2013). Such spaces therefore provide opportunities for women to become not only more effective technological users, but also active producers, who possess "a much wider range of skills and abilities, and hence a much wider range of opportunities and benefits" (Huyer & Hafkin, 2006, as cited by Parmentier & Huyer, 2008, p. 14). The skills and competencies encouraged in makerspaces are also those associated with educational programs and careers that are often inaccessible to women (Parmentier & Huyer, 2008), rendering makerspaces a viable interim method to bridge the digital divide. The underlying principles in these spaces of "community-driven, open-access, shared resources and tools, [and] knowledge sharing" are furthermore a "natural fit for a library community" (Breitkopf, 2011), making possible their integration into existing public institutions. Currently, the scant literature on makerspaces in Latin America makes no reference to whether or how gender inequalities are being addressed (see Holbrook, 2012; Bargent, 2013), but the potential benefits they represent warrant further consideration.

Libraries as Activists

Finally, as noted earlier, despite the persistent discourse to the contrary, current policy and practices in Latin America are not sufficiently addressing the gender digital divide, and are further preventing women from advocating for change by making public information inaccessible. More than any of the other myths heretofore discussed, this myth of adequate ICT policy and consequent obstruction of information access speaks directly to a need that libraries can fulfill. This is because, with their commitment to the information desires and needs of their users, "librarians and other information professionals are best equipped to shift the dynamic towards a freer flow of knowledge unattached to markers of access privilege" (Booth, 2014). While libraries were once viewed as objective, neutral storehouses of information, this image has been challenged by a growing awareness that libraries' decisions concerning information access are in many ways both powerful and political (Sadler & Bourg, 2015). This has led many to conclude that librarians practice "an increasingly activist profession" (Booth, 2014) in their support of equal and equitable access to information, making them ideal advocates to side with Latin American women in their efforts to improve regional ICT policy and practice. In addition, the commitment of libraries to information and digital literacies (M. McNiff, personal communication, November 3,

2015) makes them uniquely suited to assist women in harnessing the potential of complex, highly technical public information, by equipping them with necessary literacy skills.

Delays in 'Bridge Construction'

At the same time that libraries are arguably poised to supply many of the materials needed to bridge the gender digital divide, there are several constraints on their potential effectiveness. First and foremost, the current body of literature on libraries and librarians in Latin America is quite small, which makes it difficult to say with confidence how viable these proposed undertakings might be. Statistics about the infrastructure and performance of libraries in Latin America, as well as information about the demographics, education, and training of librarians, is for all intents and purposes nonexistent. Instances of collaboration between libraries and other public-access centres, like telecentres, are likewise not well documented. In the past, Argentina was an exception to this, boasting an integration of community or "popular" libraries with existing public library institutions that was well received by researchers and the public alike (Gomez & Gould, 2010; Chin-Roemer et al., 2011). Nevertheless, no follow-up studies have been conducted that could indicate the sustainability of such a venture.

Libraries in Latin America have also experienced flagging popularity in recent years, and are often viewed as spaces for scholars and students to use, rather than the general population (Chin-Roemer, DeCrease, & Gomez, 2011). Although communities value their libraries as safe spaces and repositories of credible information, they do not always perceive them as relevant for their everyday needs (Gomez & Gould, 2010). Additionally, libraries in developing countries often lack necessary staff, training, and resources to meet users' ICT needs (Gomez & Gould, 2010, p. 260), significantly limiting the institutions' instructional and educational capabilities. The physical conditions of libraries can also pose challenges. Gonzalez and Jiménez note that, in Costa Rican libraries, "the conditions of use are more controlled by previous established rules (silence, limitation on uses and lack of resources)" (as cited by Gomez & Gould, 2010, p. 258), with some of these "resources" being the ICTs themselves. Additionally, although libraries in developing countries generally receive more institutional and political support than other public-access centres (Gomez & Gould, 2010), implementing makerspaces, collaborative educational programming, and data collection initiatives could become costly. Until more research is conducted, however, the specific obstacles Latin American libraries and librarians face in bridging the information gaps will remain clouded in conjecture.

Conclusion

After 'de-myth-tifying' and critically examining the realities surrounding the gender digital divide in Latin America, libraries emerge as a plausible means of bridging the gap. The persistent misconception that the gender digital divide is insignificant in Latin America, for example, has been due in large part to a lack of sex-disaggregated statistics about technology access and usage. Given their nature as both public-access and information management centres, libraries are well suited to collecting such data. While pernicious myths about women's inherent technophobia and natural incompatibility with digital technologies have run rampant in the region for years, these perceived inequalities are in fact due to parallel inequalities in education, skills training, and ICT production between men and women. Each of these needs can be addressed by various library services, from collaborative technical educational programs to opportunities for producing ICTs in makerspaces. Finally, despite the presence of many prominent organizations in the area, current ICT policies and practices in Latin America are not adequately addressing women's needs and concerns. This has required women to access public information to inform their development of advocacy efforts, in which libraries can act as supporters and partners. Although further investigation is needed to determine whether libraries in Latin America can feasibly assume these roles, their potential to bring the edges of the gender digital divide closer together, positively transforming the lives of generations of women, is worthy of exploration.

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