Libraries-Technologies-Social Justice Intersections in the Rural Appalachian Region: My Reflections on Strategic Synergies in LIS Education

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"Why Libraries, Why Librarians?" Indaba
iSchool, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
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AGENDA

- Today I will highlight glimpses from my journey during the past fifteen years in diversifying engaged scholarship as a faculty member in information sciences while collaborating with libraries and integrating technologies to further social justice and social equity in local and regional environments.

- Select library-technologies-social justice intersections illustrate how technologies transform librarianship (and vice-versa) to promote social justice partnering with rural librarians, small businesses, and others, to represent their experiences and perspectives in shaping the design and development of community-based information systems and services.

- Reflections include my experiences as principal investigator of multiple grants awarded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services to the University of Tennessee totaling more than a million dollars to mobilize rural librarians in the Appalachian region.

- Special emphasis on implications for LIS education will identify integrating new directions of thought in a post-community informatics approach of engaged scholarship to bridge theory-practice-impact discourse via community engagement in the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to empower underserved rural populations (and others) make meaningful changes in their everyday lives.

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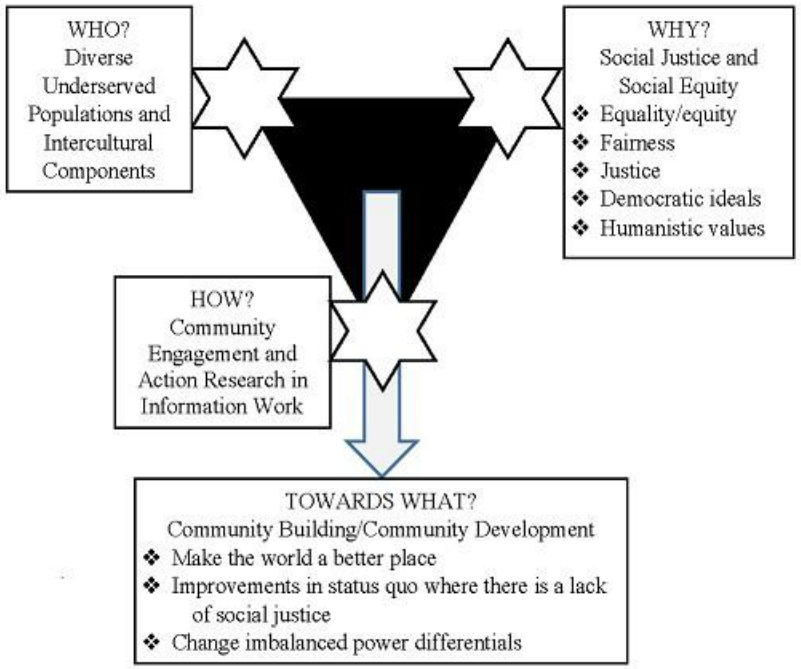
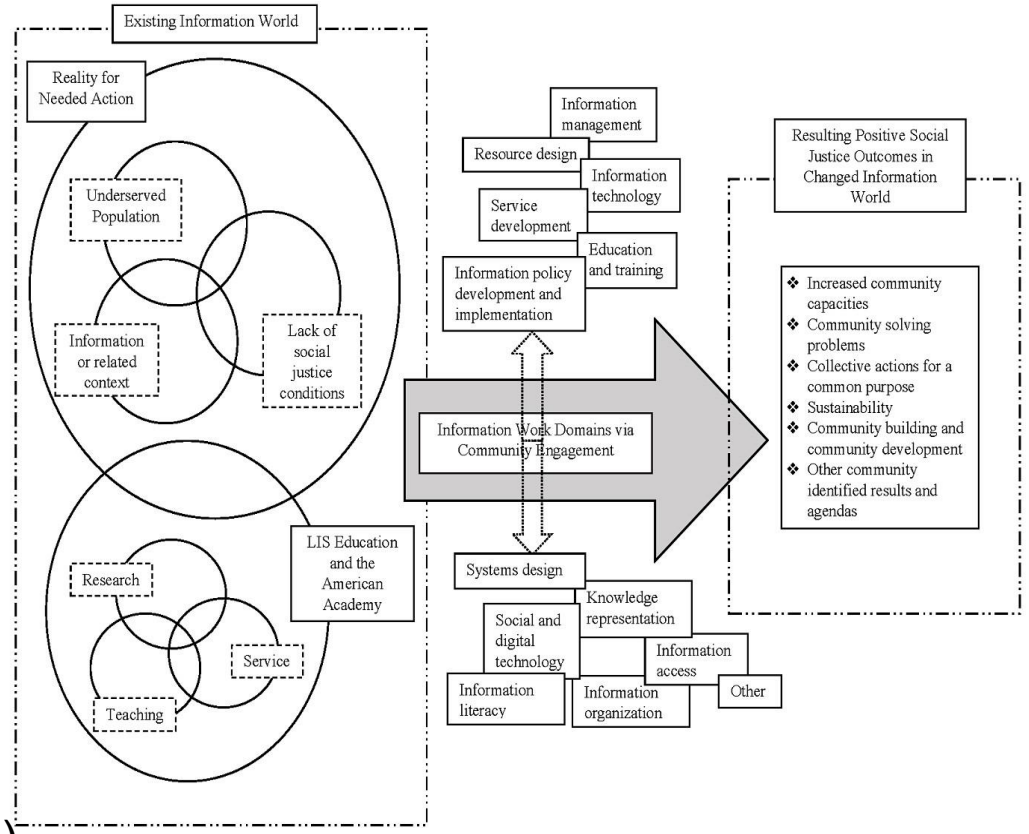
Intersections of Social Justice Scholarship, Inclusion Advocacy Action Research, and Community Engagement





Four pillars:

- ❖"who" (diverse populations)
- ❖"why" (to promote social justice/equity)
- ❖"how" (via community engagement and action research in information work)
- ❖towards the "what" (i.e., community building and community development)

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Social Justice in LIS

The term "social justice" goes beyond the legal sphere in applying the idea of justice in its administration and maintenance of fair, just, and equitable laws to every aspect of social life (Lebacqz, 1986; Barry, 2005).

Question: How can information professionals integrate technologies to further collaborations with libraries in action-oriented, socially relevant outcomes?

- Contextualize R-T-S in the everyday experiences of society's underserved in ways that attempt to change their socio-economic, socio-political, and socio-cultural experiences/realities (Mehra and Rioux, 2016).
- Re-examine scholarship, practice, and the academy in terms of its relevance and impacts on the emerging social contexts of the 21st century (Mehra, Rioux, and Albright, 2009).
- Recognize traditionally identified "marginalized" as equals who are experts in knowing their own situations/realities.
- Develop equitable partnerships in the academy to empower people to make changes in their everyday circumstances.
- Explore a range of "how to" methods and approaches that lead to tangible outcomes and impacts.

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Assessment of Technology-Embedded Impact-Driven Action Research

- AR contributes to both the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework. (Rapoport, 1970, p. 499)
- AR is a valid research method in applied fields, providing outcome-based results, and suggesting direction for progressive change.

  (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988)
- AR is closely tied to interpretive inquiry; hence traditional criteria to evaluate rigor in experimental research—objectivity, reliability, validity, and generalizability—are inappropriate, and AR researchers may establish trustworthiness of their study by reporting on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. (Stringer, 1999)
- Essential AR characteristics include decentralization, deregulation, and cooperativeness in execution to make possible transformations in social practice and changes in the social institutions where they take place while re-defining relationships that support it.

Mehra, B., and Rioux, K. (eds.). (2016). *Progressive Community Action: Critical Theory and Social Justice in Library and Information Science. Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press.*

Mehra, B. (2006). An Action Research (AR) Manifesto for Cyberculture Power to "Marginalized" Cultures of Difference. In: D. Silver and A. Massanari (eds.), *Critical Cyber-Culture Studies* (pp. 205-215). New York: New York University Press.

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Definition of Community Engagement

- Community engagement, which encompasses both community building and community development, is defined as “the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people.”

  (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1997, p.9; United Nations, 2014)

- The Campus Contact (2016), a national coalition of nearly 1,100 institutions committed to the public purposes of higher education, adopts the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification’s definition of the term as “collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (para. 3).
- Community engagement presents a practical strategy for LIS professionals to partner with stakeholders in applying their information work (incl. ICT use) to (Mehra and Robinson, 2009; Mehra, Bishop, and Partee II, 2016):
  - Develop accountability for funding agencies supporting public institutions;
  - Generate greater impact of their efforts towards economic growth and community development.

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Community Engaged Scholarship

Glimpses of Social Justice, ICT Action Research, and Community Engagement

Select Research Advocacy Activities

URL: https://tiny.utk.edu/MehraResearch2017

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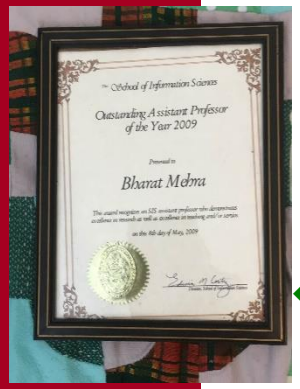
Empowering Rural Librarians as Change Agents in the 21st Century: Developing Community-Based Technology Literacy & Management Outcomes in the Southern & Central Appalachian Region



- Rural Library Professionals as Change Agents in the 21st Century: Integrating Information Technology Competencies in the Southern and Central Appalachian Region (Part II) (ITRL2) ($478,258). Institute of Museum and Library Services, *Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program*, October 2012 – September 2016 (PI: Mehra, Co-PI: Singh).
  URL: http://www.sis.utk.edu/13-scholarships-available-itrl2.

- Rural Library Professionals as Change Agents in the 21st Century: Integrating Information Technology Competencies in the Southern and Central Appalachian Region (ITRL) ($567,660). IMLS, *Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program*, October 2009 – September 2013 (PI: Mehra; Co-PIs: Black, Singh). URL: http://www.sis.utk.edu/rural-librarianship.

PARTNERS Clinch-Powell Regional Library, Nolichucky Regional Library, Ocoee River Regional Library, Sevier County Public Library System, Watauga Regional Library, representatives from other SCA regional and county library systems participated in grant activities.

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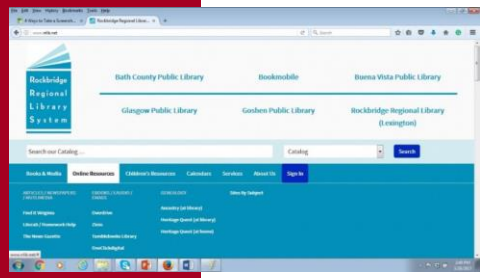
Information Technology Rural Librarian Master's Scholarship Program: Part I and Part II (ITRL and ITRL2)

The ITRL and ITRL2 grants trained 27 SCA rural library paraprofessionals to complete their master's degree part-time via distance in the UT SIS and improve their technology and management skills to serve the unique needs of the region's communities.



- **Information Technology Outcomes:** Technology infrastructure planning and analysis; Web design, development, and usability; Database design and implementation; Building digital library and web portals; Establishing hardware and software networking; Creating Library 2.0 tools.

- **Rural Library Management Outcomes:** Service evaluation and public relations portfolio for a rural library; Management of a rural library program for adults and children/young adults; Reader's advisory; Grant writing and development.

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Building Bridges Between Rural Libraries and the Small Business Community

- The Role of Rural Public Libraries in Small Business Economic Development in the Appalachian Region: A Case Study of Tennessee (PLSB-TN). ($49,557). IMLS, National Leadership Grants for Libraries – FY 2014 Guidelines (Research category), Oct. 2014 – Sept. 2016. [PI: Mehra, Co-PI: Bishop]. URL: http://scholar.cci.utk.edu/plsb-tn.

- Small Business Community Information Exchange at the Blount County Public Library in East Tennessee ($1650), 2016-17 Community Engagement Incentive Grant, Office of Community Engagement and Outreach, Univ. of TN. [PI: Mehra].

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BLOUNT COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY

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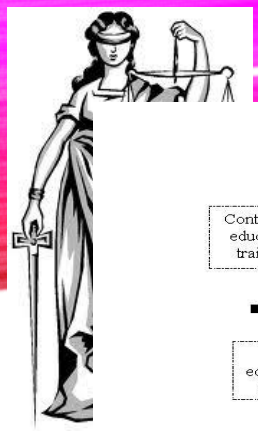

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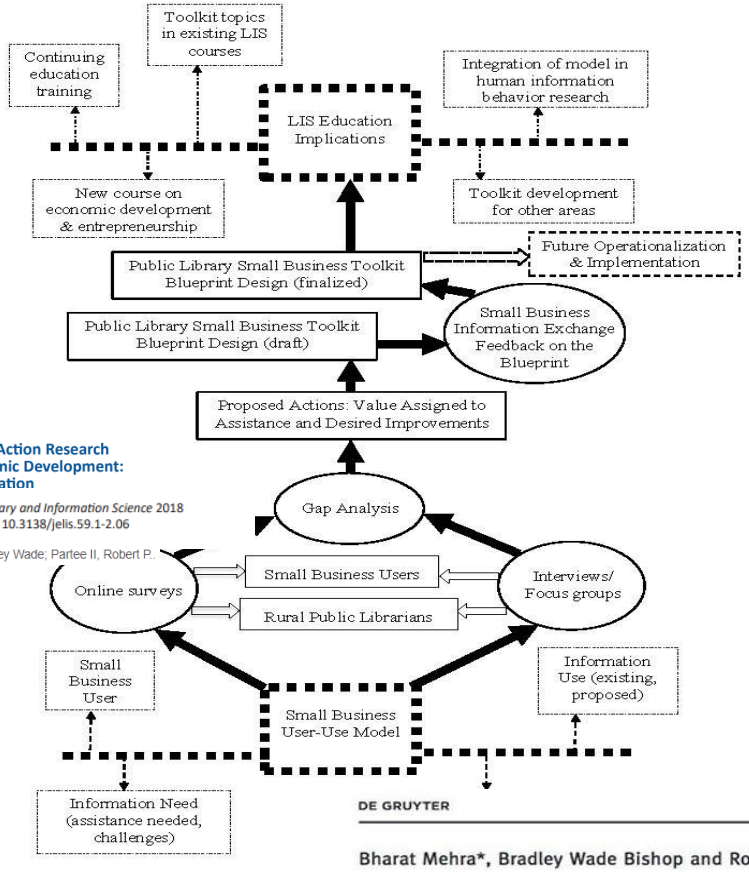
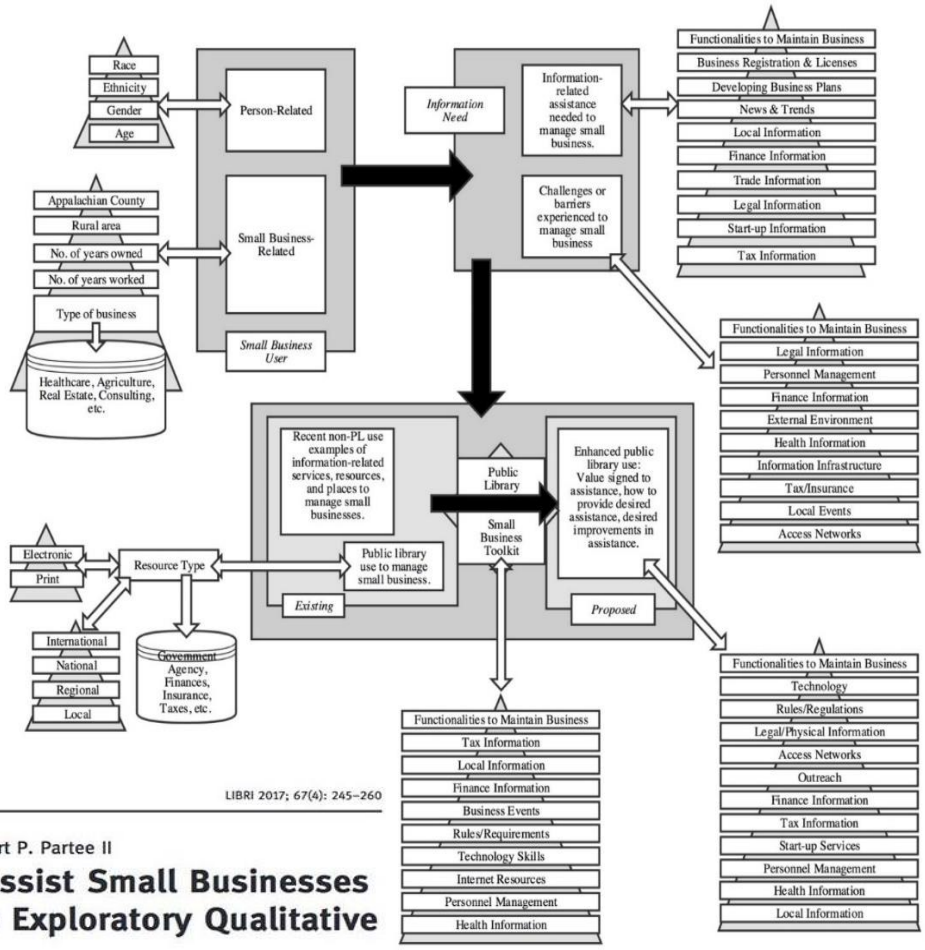
Blueprint Design of a Public Library Small Business Toolkit





A Case Methodology of Action Research to Promote Rural Economic Development: Implications for LIS Education

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Vol. 59, No. 1–2 DOI: 10.3138/jelis.59.1-2.06

Mehra, Bharat; Bishop, Bradley Wade; Partee II, Robert P.

DE GRUYTER LIBRI 2017; 67(4): 245–260

Bharat Mehra*, Bradley Wade Bishop and Robert P. Partee II

How Do Public Libraries Assist Small Businesses in Rural Communities? An Exploratory Qualitative Study in Tennessee

Building Bridges Between Rural Libraries and the Small Business Community

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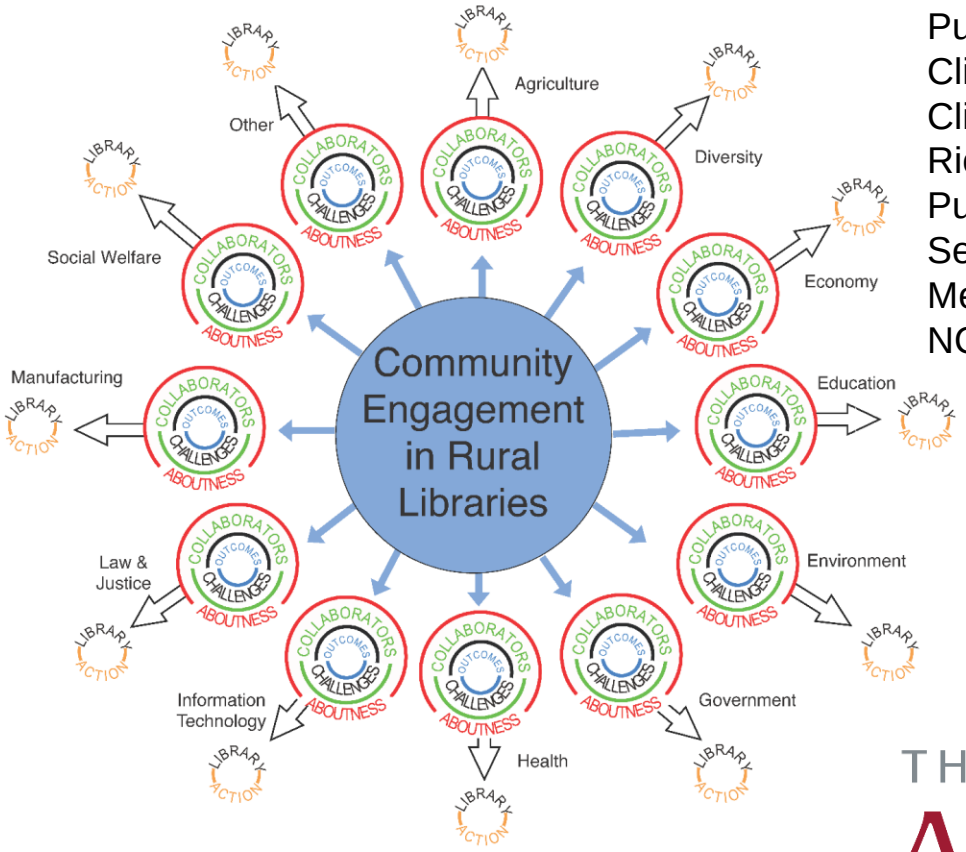
Impact-Driven Community-Engaged Research

Assessment of Rural Library Professionals' Role in Community Engagement in the Southern and Central Appalachian Region: Mobilization from Change Agents to Community Anchors (CA2CA@SCA-RL) ($48,708). Institute of Museum and Library Services, *Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian– FY 2017 Guidelines* (Community Anchors Project Category: Planning Grant), July 2017 – June 2019. (PI: B. Mehra. Co-PI: V. Singh). Subcontracted from the University of Tennessee to the University of Alabama. URL: http://scholar.cci.utk.edu/ca2ca-sca-rl/.



PARTNERS 1) Blount County Public Library, Maryville, TN; 2) Clinch River Regional Library, Clinton, TN; 3) Library of Virginia, Richmond, VI; 4) Sevier County Public Library System, Sevierville, TN; 5) Wiggins Memorial Library, Buies Creek, NC.

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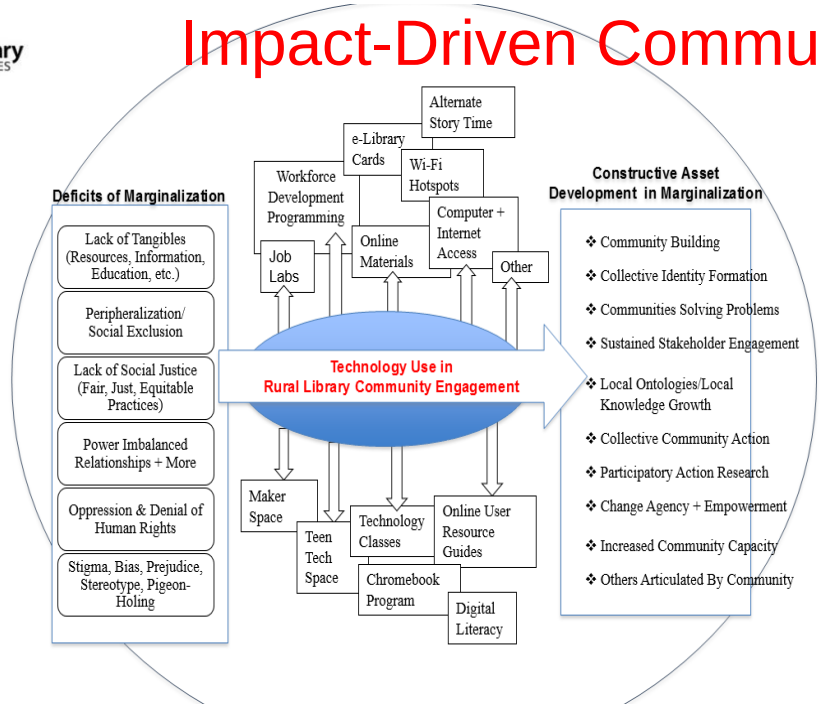
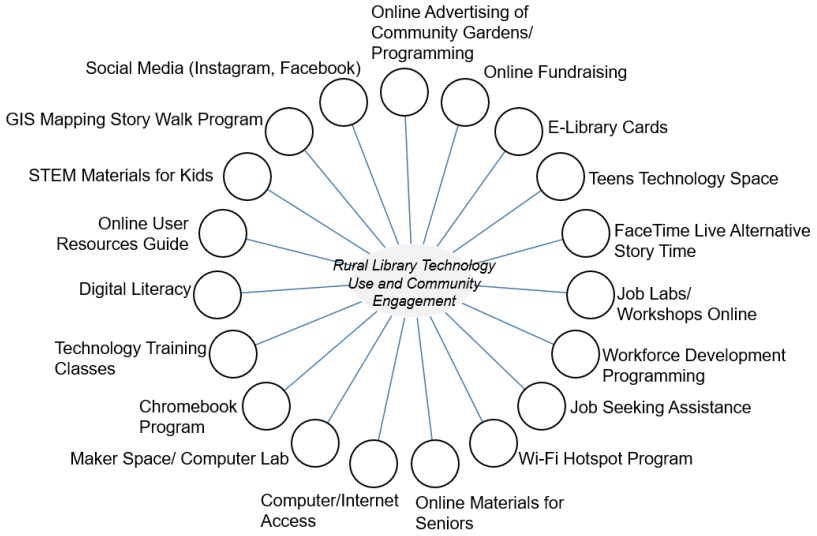
Impact-Driven Community-Engaged Research





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Scenarios of technology use to promote community engagement: Overcoming marginalization and bridging digital divides in the Southern and Central Appalachian rural libraries

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ABSTRACT

This article identifies scenarios of technology use in rural libraries to promote community engagement in overcoming marginalization and bridging rural digital divides in the Southern and Central Appalachian (SCA) region. The research is based on a qualitative content analysis of feedback collected from 15 rural librarians in semi-structured interviews and three respondents each in five focus groups during 2017–2018. Select scenarios defined as typical experience-related representative narratives of technology use of rural librarians serve as a tool to investigate their community-engaged initiatives. Respondents' perspectives, behaviors, and experiences of technology use in community engagement selectively highlight their activities, collaborating partners, encountered challenges specific to the region, and the resulting outcomes of their initiatives. The article extends past theory-practice discourse in information science research to integrate impact that was documented in respondents' community-engaged technology use behaviors in the SCA rural environments. It explores a positive model of technology use and community engagement in the SCA rural libraries as a strategy to overcome marginalization and bridge rural digital divides historically experienced in the region.

1. Introduction

This article analyzes how rural libraries use technology to engage with their communities and overcome marginalization, thereby, bridging rural digital divides in the Southern and Central Appalachian (SCA) region. The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), created as a United States federal-state partnership, demarcates Appalachia to include 420 counties in Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. The ARC (1974) identifies *Southern Appalachia* to include most of Appalachian Virginia and Tennessee as well as the western Carolinas and the northern parts of Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi, while *Central Appalachia* includes: West Virginia's nine southernmost counties, eastern Kentucky, Virginia's southwestern tip, and the northwestern portion of Tennessee's Appalachian area (Bush, 2003). Despite their nuanced differences, the ARC classified these regions together owing to their shared history and industries, similar environmental conditions, and overlapping cultural characteristics of political and economic marginalization, from Appalachian

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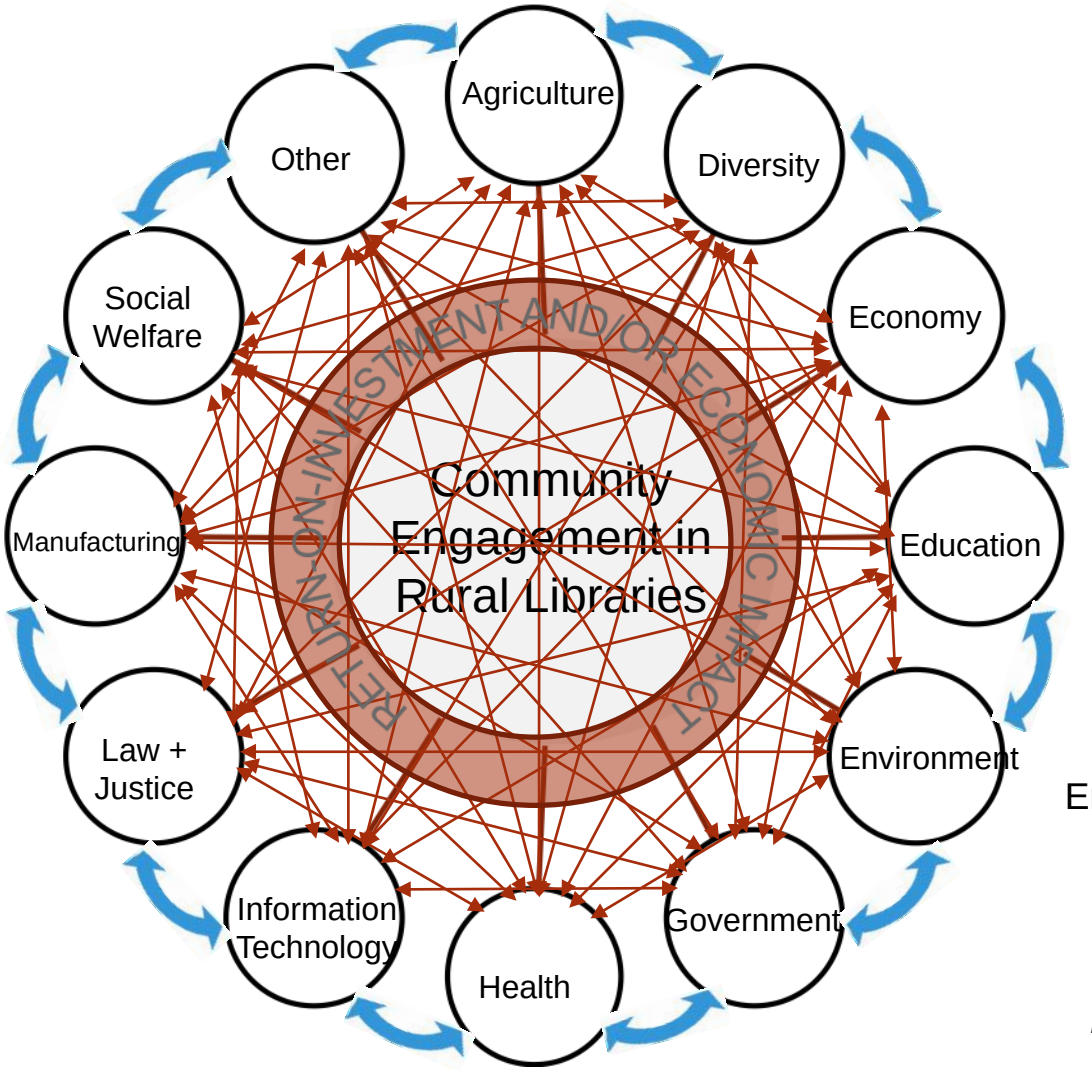
Domain-Based Model of Community Engagement in Rural Libraries

[Revised]: Library-Community Centric Values



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Mehra, B., Sikes, E. S., and Singh, V. (2019). Scenarios of Health Engagement Experiences and Health Justice in Rural Libraries. *International Journal of Information, Diversity, & Inclusion* (Special Issue: Health Justice, Part I. Edited by Beth St. Jean, Gagan Jindal, Yuting Liao, and Paul T. Jaeger), 3(3), 56-87.

Technology-Use Outcomes in Rural Community Engagement: Agriculture Cross-Over

Use of technology for advertising and showcase of a community gardens project: "…as far as agricultural support, we use technology to advertise our partnership with the University Extensions and one of the favorite things for my patrons in the spring are gardening programs that they read about on our website…and the Master Gardeners help with our beautiful gardens and they keep that maintained and planted and then we let them do a plant sale every May that they share pictures of on the library's Facebook page."

Technology in the project delivery of the seed library in a rural community: "We also get online donations to our seed library. We were the first small library, having a seed library registered. And, so we collect seeds and post pictures on our website… we had this year, beautiful Black Hollyhocks growing in our garden, so I went out and collected seeds from our patrons through social media and put those over in our seed library. We support our farmer's market that's local here and get people to participate through Facebook, this last year I did not have a table set up, but year before I did and I actually gave out sunflower seeds from the seed library."

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Technology-Use Outcomes in Rural Community Engagement: Education Cross-Over

e-Library card provision for children in far-flung geographical areas to give remote access to online materials: "…I'm going around to the middle school and getting all the kids with a library electronic card to where they can check out e-books, audiobooks, and video through us…whatever they check out, it checks itself back in, so the parent's never pay out-of-pocket for a lost book and the teachers have got the kids' reading all the time because they all have laptops."

Teen technology space resources and materials for learning opportunities for children and young adults: "The library worked with Rotary to get that grant…trying to now pull in some Emory & Henry students to help conduct programs and sessions…twice a month kids just free play with the X-Box. And, they have a book club…This past summer, they had a couple come in and do a program on video editing…be the place where the robotics goes…"

Online delivery of alternative story time to meet learning needs of children with special needs: "I'm doing Facetime Live with story time, getting those rural kids that are in the special needs spectrum. Because we know that the loud noises really bother some of them and the fluorescent lighting is horrible…and they can watch me do story time on Facebook anytime because I archive it."

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Technology-Use Outcomes in Rural Community Engagement: Health Cross-Over

Online mapping to support the Story Walk Program: The Cooperative Extension guy got as excited about it as I was and so he's been helping me talk to people and kind of unofficially get supervisor buy-in…he's going to lend me a GPS system so that I can go mark the sites because what I want to do is make an online map so that people can just see the map online to track when they actually walk it for healthy living and exercises."

Born Learning Trail with health kiosks delivered through technology applications: "And so, we got grants to do a Born Learning trail and then we got grants to do learning kiosks with monitors and browsing for children and adults…Part of our money came from the United Way through the Healthy Community Action Team…the catch phrase I was using was creating healthy kids from head to toe…so, the idea that we would work together to help kids get more activity. And so, their goal was [to] fight childhood obesity."

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An Exploratory Prototype to Map Community Engagement in the Southern and Central Appalachian Rural Libraries

ASIS&T 82nd Annual Meeting, October 19-23, 2019, Melbourne, Australia

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Introduction

This poster highlights a work-in-progress prototype (GIS4SCA-RL) of a geographic information system (GIS) to map rural libraries' community-engaged collaborations with external stakeholders in the Southern and Central Appalachian (SCA) region. The structure of the GIS4SCA-RL demarcates eleven domains: agriculture, diversity, economy, education, environment, government, health, information technology, law, manufacturing, and social welfare. Rural community engagement activities in each domain describe their descriptive "aboutness," collaborating partners, debilitating challenges specific to the region, and resulting outcomes [Mehra, Sikes, & Singh, 2018]. This web-based dynamic collection in GIS might inspire information agencies (e.g., public/private sectors, professional associations/ organizations, etc.) to expand the prototype in developing applications that represent a larger set of rural libraries and other under-represented information entities.

Definitions

The ARC (1974) identifies Central Appalachia to include West Virginia's nine southernmost counties, eastern Kentucky, Virginia's southwestern tip, and the northwestern portion of Tennessee's Appalachian area [Bush, 2003], while southern Appalachia includes Appalachian Virginia and Tennessee, western Carolinas, and northern parts of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. The U. S. Census Bureau [2010] defines "rural" as areas with less than 2,500 people and territory [Economic Development Research Group, 2007].

Figure 1. Visual representation of the information and structure of the GIS4SCA-RL.

Development of the GIS4SCA-RL

The GIS4SCA-RL includes limited web-based examples of select community-engaged initiatives in SCA rural libraries. We used "Story Map Journal" developed by the ArcGIS software produced by international supplier Environmental Systems Research Institute (Esri) to implement the GIS4SCA-RL and tailor user-centric and research-driven resources online [Esri, 2018]. The GIS4SCA-RL structured as a "map journal" contains entries (called sections) on the left-side margin that users can scroll and/or click on embedded hyperlinks, maps, images, or videos. Future usability studies will evaluate the effectiveness of the system, its functionality, navigation, structure, and aesthetics, while expanding the content. The GIS4SCA-RL sections categorized according to an alphabetical ordering of the eleven domains with a list of relevant community-engaged initiatives in each domain spotlight the rural library where that activity took place. Users can also navigate by clicking on an SCA map on the right-hand side that has identified "hot spots" highlighting the location of the specific rural libraries (See Figure 2).

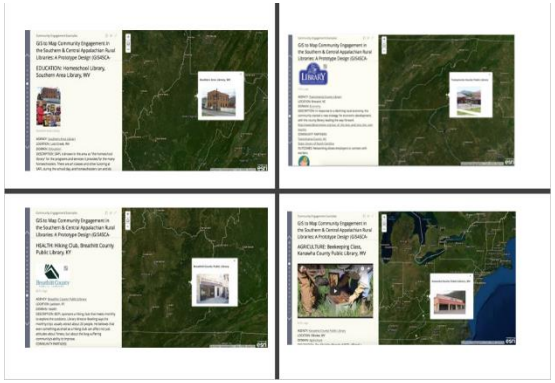

Figure 2. Selected screenshots of the GIS4SCA-RL.

Under each listed domain, clicking on the name of the community-engaged initiative provides the user a glimpse of analysis of the project represented as an online record with appropriate metadata descriptions. These contain fields that include the agency name and location, domain focus, project description, community partners, challenges, and outcomes (as relevant) (See Figure 3).

Figure 3. A snapshot of a record located in the GIS4SCA-RL of the Kitchen Gardens Program at the Oconee Public Library in South Carolina.

GIS4SCA-RL URL:

https://tiny.utk.edu/GIS4SCA-RL

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Conclusions

This poster gives a glimpse of an innovative GIS project that provided us an opportunity to explore visualization strategies to evaluate and represent community- engaged initiatives in select case examples of SCA rural libraries [Rinner & Bird, 2009]. The GIS4SCA-RL served as an experimental test bed to further mapping the efforts of a larger set of rural libraries around the country based on availability of future funding. The need to tell the story of the positive experiences of rural libraries and translate those through the medium of a potentially powerful visualized resource (such as the GIS4SCA-RL) is important to challenge past negative stereotypes about the SCA region. We hope such efforts inspire information researchers, educators, and practitioners as well as information-based organizations, professional associations, funding agencies, amongst others, to develop such tools to further social justice agendas in "making visible" and constructively representing the experiences of marginalized entities (e.g., SCA rural libraries) within the library and information science professions [Mehra & Rioux, 2016].

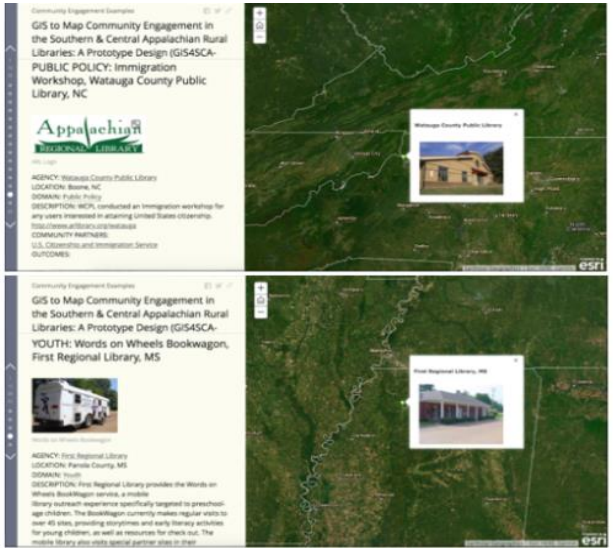

Figure 4. Further selected screenshots of the GIS4SCA-RL.

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Synergies: Moving Forward

In a cultural context of a ubiquitous immersion and hegemonic embeddedness within the neoliberal forces of corporatization of the American academy (and the world) there is a need for a paradigmatic shift in the conceptualization and operationalization of our roles as LIS professionals:

- This wave of disciplinary territorial-turf battles in higher education administration might lead to a demise of “LIS” or a complete swallowing up of our existence.

How can we diversify our partnerships to generate externally-driven impact while collaborating with libraries and integrating technologies to further social justice and social equity in local, regional, national, and international collaborations?

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Actualities + Potentialities of Impact-Driven Social Justice Scholarship: Overcoming Historical and Contemporary Challenges

- White-IST [White + Elitist] information research, teaching, scholarship, education, and practices in its hegemonic Anglo/Euro roots

"White-IST" refers to a hegemonic immersion in an Anglo/Euro-centric information research discourse and practice and its "closed-box" knowledge dominating all areas of scholarly experience and reality (Mehra, 2016)

"Hegemonic" representation is an imbalanced power and suppression of everything outside established knowledge domains discounting any non-normative "other" forms of philosophical and methodological pathways (Flank, 2009)

- Entrenched traditional canons of knowledge domains, theories, and methods
- Limited conceptualization based on internalization of privileged positions given to positivist/positivist traditions, approaches, theories, and methods
- Drawing solely on western disciplines in the social sciences with their own inherited biases and limitations
- Inadequate and poor bridging of theory-practice divides

Mehra, B., and Gray, L. (forthcoming). An "Owning Up" of Six White-IST Phases in LIS to Further Real Transformations. *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy.*

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Theory-Practice-Impact
Why Is It Important?

(Mehra, Sikes, and Singh, 2019c)

- Information research, technology training, and library practice has been conspicuous in overlooking impact from an external perspective beyond a disciplinary narrow and inward-looking tunnel vision in their institutions.
- This has provided limited theoretical bent without translation into proposed actions to change imbalanced power dynamics and status quo beyond the everyday inward-looking practice of librarianship and information science research.
- Theory-practice-impact incorporates contemporary democratic ideologies, propagates collaborative relationships, redefines knowledge and its relationship to society's historical power inequities, and proposes change that is incremental and constructive.
- It provides LIS in land grant institutions evidence to show the relevance of their pursuits to the everyday lives of lay people who support local, regional, and state colleges and universities through their taxpayer contributions.

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Technology Courses in LIS Education

Provide students experiences in IT courses that (Mehra, Singh, Hollenbach, and Partee II, 2017):

- Are externally impact-driven, inter-relational, community-engaged, and integrative in spirit to further social justice and inclusion advocacy via community building and community development.
- Adopt community-based participatory action research.
- Develop community-embedded project-driven skills drawing on (and drawing in) real-life external community contexts.
- Produce tangible deliverables that are used, useful, and usable in community-embedded contexts to extend external impacts.
- Build inter-and-intra disciplinary bridges to generate impact across multi-domains in real-life community-embedded settings.

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Technology Courses in LIS Education

Train professionals to apply Information literacy-fluency-advocacy beyond our bastion of privileged spaces and institutions on topics like (Mehra, 2019):

- Web design and development
- Database, information, management, and analytics
- Technology development, application, evaluation, and assessment
- Visualization and modelling, distributed systems
- Cloud sourcing, open source applications
- Development of social media tools and analysis
- Linked data
- Big data management
- Cyber security
- STEM
- Others?

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Questions and Comments?

Thank you!

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