This has been discussed and dissected by wider heads than mine. The divide is long and deep, and perhaps made worse when you discover there's no such thing as a "digital native." For a long time, we thought (and hoped) that kids growing up with technology would simply be "native" to it, understand it and use it. Onwards and upwards to bigger and better things.

It hasn't happened. Yet, at least.

Are you familiar with the terms: trolls, insta, finsta, snap filters, AMA, NSFW, selfie-itits, IRL, TIL; familiar with statistics that demonstrate increasing depression, anxiety, loneliness, plastic surgeries? All of these have existed pre-Internet, and will exist after the Internet has been replaced with whatever new connections that are yet to be invented. However, we are seeing different issues crop up due to the quantity of it all, along with the speed of delivery. If you're not sure what all this is, not to worry, we're going to get there soon enough.

Back to the divide. It's real, and it has changed over the years. The "simpler" divide was this: there were digital haves and have-nots. The library could fulfil the role of "digital bridge" by supplying the devices: computers (desktops) and printers. It was, overall, fairly easy, and it was easier to get funding: by buying a device, there was a single cost involved. It was clear and simple for the library to prove usage and justify budgets.

Less simple, but still growing in importance, was the digital divide between actually having the devices and knowing how to use them. Also growing are the ethical concerns with devices and applications. We know apps like Facebook have been designed to be as addictive as possible. What is going to happen with children raised on this?

As I write this, it's January, 2021. We have grown accustomed to a new normal of video conferencing, mask-wearing, and distancing. Much of what made technology interesting and fun has become drudgery in our daily lives. Even children are getting "Zoom gloom," a term coined for too much screen time and too many meetings (at this time, I can't find the originator of the term, but it's being heavily used).

Even worse, in my opinion, is the fact that engaging in our normal style of in-person service has been pulled out from under us. I took a gander at the ALA web site and searched for "digital divide." As I suspected, there's a boatload of resources available, but the post, "The Digital Divide Inside the Library," by Kate Sheehan caught my eye. She links the words, "unteachable aspects," back to a 2007 post about hospitality. Yes, hospitality.

Hospitality might be best summed up here as "soft skills," and in a shameless act of self-promotion, please feel free to view the YouTube Nioga Mobile Soft Skills series. It's a deeper dive into the "Top 9" skills you might like to see. By the way, "Top 9" is in quotes for a reason, as there really is no order to soft skills, so take this list with a grain of salt!

So, even in our "digitally connected" world, being human and showing empathy are still valuable traits. To bridge the digital divide, we can still use the tried and tested methods of teaching and reaching our patrons. Curbside pickup with a smile, telephone calls about materials, friendly text messages or emails from the library are all worthy ways to start bridging the gap.

Another thing, a soft skill, that sometimes people get sick of hearing about: Smiling. It really does "show" in your voice - through Zoom, through masks, through the telephone. If you're feeling fine, make sure it shows on your face!

I recently attended a webinar hosted by the National Digital Inclusion Alliance, and they outline broad steps to be taken to help ease this divide. Many of our library staff will be familiar with these ideas, outlined under the "How We Work" section of the site: "NDIA combines grassroots community engagement with technical knowledge, research, and coalition building to advocate on behalf of people working in their communities for digital equity."

During the 2020 year, libraries have stepped up and provided services like WiFi in the buildings - by remaining safely open, we are an automatic Internet provider in any neighborhood, urban or rural. We have installed wifi extenders so that people may remain in their cars in the parking lots and still get service. Here's an article by the Institute of Museum and Library Services on mobile hotspots from the month of May.

Our libraries have stepped up with service and a smile, as we always do, to assist our communities. We are in the "sandwich," mind the "gap," and slog on. We will continue to bridge the digital divide and help our patrons!