

BiblioTech as the Re-Imagined Public Library: Where Will it Find You?

Laura Cole

BiblioTech, San Antonio, Texas, United States.

lcole@bexar.org



Copyright © 2016 by **Laura Cole**. This work is made available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Abstract:

In 2013, Bexar County launched BiblioTech, the first all digital public library in the United States. BiblioTech capitalizes on technology to reach beyond the library walls and integrate the public library in facets of everyday life previously unavailable through paper and print. At its core, BiblioTech changes the traditional understanding of how libraries operate. BiblioTech's digital model prompts a paradigm shift and challenges the library to seek out new ways to serve otherwise disengaged patron populations.

This paper will, first, discuss the launch of BiblioTech; its impetus, mission, timeline, and challenges. The evolution of BiblioTech over three years of operation will be presented along with various community and intergovernmental partnerships that the library has forged in fulfillment of its mission. Finally, future opportunities and plans for development are also explored.

Keywords: public library, technology access, digital library, co-location, inverted service model

The Digital Library Born of Necessity

Bexar County, Texas, boasts a population of 1.7 million, with San Antonio, population 1.3 million, the largest municipality within its borders. For decades, Bexar County has made an annual financial contribution to the City of San Antonio and San Antonio Public Library for the provision of library services to those residents outside the city limits.

Confronted with explosive growth on its perimeter, Bexar County recognized that a growing percentage of its non-urban population was moving farther away from municipal library branches. As distance increased, access to library services correspondingly decreased. The existing service model was no longer meeting our needs as it had in the past. We needed a library solution that would overcome the barrier of geography.

Bexar County Judge Nelson Wolff was the driving force behind BiblioTech. Wolff envisioned a complementary library service, one that was laser-focused in its mission and service, and one that would deliver more for less.

The obvious solution was to invest in a library that is neither defined, nor confined, by physical space; a library stored in the cloud – an all-digital library.

Overcoming Challenges

While academia boasts examples of all digital libraries, the public at large has been slow to adopt the concept. In the fast-paced world of technology, however, even three or four years can mean the difference between universal product acceptance and product rejection; between success and failure. In 2013, the opportunity was ripe and Bexar County was prepared to ride the technology momentum. County officials acted on the assumption that the timing was right for an all-digital public library.

In the past, the public categorically rejected projects that attempted to replace paper collections with digital collections. The concept was far too threatening for the average library patron. BiblioTech's acceptance can also be attributed to the fact that it was a new, complementary, library system, rather than a replacement. Bexar County had never operated a library system, and, therefore, had no paper books to transition or abandon. BiblioTech offered the public more content, without forcing them to surrender any of their existing service. We began from a position of strength.

Bexar County is faced with a significant digital divide. County officials were keenly aware of the fact that a digital library is of absolutely no value to patrons without the benefit of Internet or technology access. We recognized that technology access would be critical to BiblioTech's success. Branch libraries would be needed to serve as technology access points in challenged areas and we would need to provide a solution for patrons without the devices to support digital reading.

Libraries also serve an important social function in our communities. Libraries are a place where people can gather in an edifying environment. Neither work nor home, libraries serve as key hubs for learning, meeting and sharing. Libraries are community resource centers and access points. A typical branch library housing 10,000 books is will occupy 14,000-15,000 square feet, most of which is dedicated to the stacks. Free from the square footage required by paper books, the inaugural branch of BiblioTech found its home in a mere 4,800 square feet of vacant space in a county-owned building.

Digital Concept Meets Physical Reality

Within 11 months, from concept to completion, we opened our first branch in the heart of the south side of San Antonio where it is estimated that up to 70% of homes do not have a broadband Internet connection and where 100% of district students receive free lunch. BiblioTech offers free Wi-Fi on 48 state of the art computers, complete with a full complement of computer software programs, a luxury for those living on limited means. Our modestly sized location also provides meeting and classroom spaces. Instead of circulating paper books, we download library content on basic e-readers, externally circulated for a two-week period. To date, we have logged over 37,000 patron desktop sessions and over 12,000

e-reader circulations – numbers that attest to the dramatic need of the area. Additionally, we provide a full array of adaptive technology for the visually impaired.

BiblioTech has received resounding endorsement from the local low-vision community for its initiative to accommodate the visually impaired. Digital technology is uniquely suited to serve this population by making our entire library accessible.

Mission and Core Foundation

As singular as it was, it was critical for BiblioTech to establish its mission from the outset. “Provide all Bexar County residents technology access to enhance literacy and education, promote reading as recreation and equip residents of our community with necessary tools to thrive as citizens of the 21st century.”

BiblioTech’s model is built on the foundational pillars of resources, access and education. In order for our library to function successfully, each facet must work in conjunction with the other two. All three are interdependent and none carries real substance without the others. Technology is embedded in every function of our lives, but education is the key to making it work. Education is of no value without resources. All of our library programming is framed around a technology component, with library content and resources as the backbone to support it. BiblioTech is, above all, a public library.

A Library or a Computer Store?

Our branch libraries can be a bit confounding for the first time patron. In appearance, they are a stark departure from the typical library the patron expects to see. The first thing that patrons notice is the lack of shelves filled with books. Almost simultaneously, patrons are dazzled by long banks of sleek, large-screen computers in a glistening, high-tech, reading room. Nelson Wolff came to his political career from a background in retail. He was adamant the library space should send a strong visual message; one that would communicate investment in the community. His belief in the core value of outstanding customer service shaped both the physical design of the library and service of the staff.

Upon entering the library, patrons are met at the door by a uniformed staff member ready to greet them. Staff members are available to provide tours and an orientation to first time library users who may be uncomfortable or unfamiliar with the new surroundings. The circulation desk and office area are intentionally small so that it is uncomfortable for management or staff to spend too much time away from the reading room floor – away from patrons. There is no reference desk in the library. Instead, staff members circulate throughout the space, regularly. Staff movement held an unanticipated boon. Organically, patrons began to raise their hands whenever they had questions or needed assistance. They were not forced to leave their seats or their work to ask for help. This “classroom” rubric has become a regular part of the BiblioTech culture.

Digital Opens Doors – Literally

We encourage library patrons to visit our branches. They are beautiful facilities and a genuine source of pride for their neighborhoods. They provide essential technology access and connectivity for those without.

But, perhaps, BiblioTech's true elegance and most significant distinction lie in the fact that, for many, the buildings are superfluous to the library. Information accessibility is no longer limited to those able to be physically present "at" the library. As we explore the ramifications, everything we have ever thought about the library turns on its head. The paradigm shift means that rather than a library being the destination, the patron becomes the destination for information. The result is an inverted service model that incites a renewed exploration of how the library can feature in daily life. It prompts a critical survey to identify and address library service voids created solely by physical limitations.

The paradigm shift extends further. When we change the landscape from paper to digital, we must also reframe our understanding of the roles of library and librarian. If it is not confined by the physical, the library is no longer the keeper of information, but, rather, the liberator – no longer the preserver but the cultivator. Likewise the librarian is freed from paper book maintenance and floorspace management. Just as the library ceases to be a storehouse, the librarian ceases to be a custodian. The librarian, instead, takes on the more active role of navigator, helping the patron maneuver the vast sea of information and discern what is valuable.

Expanding Along the Way

We quickly realized that BiblioTech could serve the County internally as well as externally. The tax dollars invested in BiblioTech on behalf our county residents could be stretched and serve double-duty by supporting County business as well. The justice system is a core function of county business with over 40% of the county budget dedicated to its service, including county courts and jail operations. Incarceration is costly and recidivism is all too common. It goes without saying that it is in the best interest of both the county and the taxpayer to foster skills to support successful re-entry for inmates.

- **MATCH (Mothers and Their Children) Program**

In cooperation with the Bexar County Sheriff, BiblioTech launched a reading program for incarcerated mothers in the jail. Books on subjects such as parenting, self-improvement, job skills and devotional reading are loaded on to e-reading devices and distributed to the inmates for independent reading. A BiblioTech staff member joins the group to lead a weekly book study.

This program, also a first in Texas, has been extremely successful in building reading skills among the inmates. A teenage child of one of the participants reported he had never before seen his mother engage in any kind of positive activity, and he was excited that she was developing an enthusiasm for books.

- **Juvenile Detention**

Similarly, we have partnered with the juvenile detention center. Juvenile detainees are universally registered for library cards, and probation officers use material downloaded from BiblioTech's catalog to motivate learning and mitigate the interruption in their education. When juveniles leave the facility, they do so as registered library patrons with new educational resources at their fingertips.

By supporting the students with library services as juveniles, we aim to provide them with a vision of personal potential precluding future involvement with law enforcement and corrections.

- Adult Probationers

BiblioTech support of the county justice system does not end with detention. In partnership with Bexar County Adult Probation, BiblioTech provides basic technology education for adults re-entering civilian life as post detainees. Probation officers carefully screen candidates for suitability and potential for success. Each student, as a condition of participation, signs a code of conduct outlining rules for the program including clear behavior and attendance expectations. Students learn basic computer skills such as creating and saving files, basic search skills and resume building. At the end of the six-week program, each student receives a certificate that recognizes successful completion and skill achievement. The class provides a much needed "leg up" in securing employment and the certificate can be used to demonstrate personal commitment to potential employers.

- Central Jury Room

BiblioTech is entirely scalable and can find a home in a variety of iterations. In January 2014, we opened a satellite "branch" in the Central Jury room of the County courthouse. Roughly 400 unique visitors are called for jury duty every day. We have a small circulation desk, a self-service kiosk and on-site staff available to register patrons for our service, teach about our resources, and circulate reading devices should jurors find themselves trapped for several hours without a good book.

With the assistance of the Chief Central Jury Bailiff, BiblioTech registration information has been included on the formal jury summons. Along with directions for reporting, transportation and parking, the potential juror will receive instructions on how to become a BiblioTech patron, making jury duty a much more palatable experience. We receive positive feedback on this service every week from grateful jurors, many of whom, become regular BiblioTech users.

ATTENTION JURORS!
**Wireless Internet Now Available &
RIDE VIA FREE TO JURY DUTY!**

VIA FREE RIDES ON VIA

- * Jurors must show original juror summons to ride the Via bus.
- * **No photocopies accepted.** Bus operators with questions, contact Dispat
- * Jurors in trial get your additional bus tickets in the Central Jury Room.
- * Plan trips at VIAinfo.net or call 210-362-2020.

PARKING - BEXAR COUNTY PARKING GARAGE

- *The Bexar County Parking Garage at the corner of Flores and Nueva is \$2.00 with a ticket validated in the Central Jury Room
- * Limited Parking in the garage
- * **Parking available in private lots at their rates**
- * There is parking for persons with disabilities around the elevators on every floor of the Bexar County Parking Garage

BiblioTech - Bexar County's Digital Library

- * Now available for download: e-books, audio books, & graphic novels
- * Reading devices are available for checkout in the Central Jury Room
- * Sign up today on our website, www.bexarbibliotech.org and click on "register here for your BiblioTech library card"

- BiblioTech EDU

Educational support outside of the library walls was the driving force behind BiblioTech EDU, our partnership with 14 school districts in Bexar County. Bexar County donated 520 reading devices to middle schools and high schools throughout Bexar County. During the 2014-2015 academic year, our Outreach staff conducted library presentations and registered 16,263 student library patrons. 58 Bexar County schools now enjoy expanded libraries through the integration of BiblioTech.

- Joint Base San Antonio (JBSA)

Bexar County is home to three military bases, struggling under constrained federal budgets. Bexar County was able to provide relief for base libraries by engaging in a partnership which allows BiblioTech access to base residents through donated reading devices and on-site kiosks. BiblioTech staff trained base librarians to assist residents with registration, utilization of resources and content download. This “train the trainer” model allows us to cast a wider net for patron service while ensuring sustainability. It has also become the staple format as we expand to other areas.

- Alamo Community Colleges Computer Certification

BiblioTech partnered with Alamo Community College as an annex to support The coursework will help students develop the skills and knowledge base they need to apply to the Open Cloud Academy and/or seek employment opportunities. Under the partnership, Alamo Colleges will provide the skills training free of charge to eligible students. College coursework and integrated basic skills training will begin in the summer of 2016, with classes meeting four days per week for 12 weeks. Students will work with career navigators with wraparound support available for additional learning skills.

- San Antonio Housing Authority Partnership

BiblioTech’s scalability has allowed us to establish our second branch library in 2,100 sf. of commercial space in a San Antonio Housing Authority development. In July of 2015, BiblioTech West opened its doors to the public as a “storefront” library in the Gardens of San Juan Housing Development. Demographics within a three-mile radius of The Gardens at San Juan Square reveal a population that is sorely disadvantaged both financially and educationally.¹

¹ U.S. Census Bureau 2013 Estimate

	Within a Three Mile Radius of the San Juan Housing Project	Bexar County
Median Household Income	\$24,973	\$49,141
Median Value of Home	\$86,449	\$122,600
Percentage with a Four Year College Degree	4%	26%
Percentage Renter Occupied Home	42%	39%
Percentage Latino and African American	95%	67%
Persons per Household	3.64	2.82

Within the three-mile radius lie two major high schools: Lanier and Burbank. These two school also show magnified impairments compared to the state:²

	Lanier HS	Burbank HS	Statewide Average
SAT Average	1185	1287	1422
ACT Average	16.3	18.6	20.5
Percentage who Graduate	82.7%	91.9%	87.7%
Expenditure per Student per Year	\$7,027	\$7,088	\$8,276
Texas Success Initiative (TSI) Higher Education Readiness Component: English Language Arts	48%	59%	65%
TSI Higher Education Readiness Component: Mathematics	36%	73%	73%

Embedding the public library within public housing is another yet another example of the versatility that digital libraries offer. For those on living on limited means, library resources essentially delivered to the home, is life-changing.

- Assessing Community Impact - UTSA

In fall, 2015, BiblioTech found a symbiotic partner in research students at the University of Texas San Antonio. University of Texas at San Antonio's College of Education and Human Development utilized BiblioTech as a semester long research project. The research focus centered on BiblioTech's effect on student life and student achievement in the local community.

² Texas Education Agency, 2012-2013 School Report Card.

Over the course of 4 months, doctoral students researched whether 1) a relationship exists between the use of BiblioTech services and reading achievement among middle and high school students near the library, and 2) what students value about the all-digital library.

The researchers found there is a positive relationship between the use of BiblioTech and reading achievement among its middle and high school patrons. The second portion of the research, conducted through a focus group and student surveys, found that computer gaming, computer use for homework, e-book reading for fun and homework, programming and studying or “hanging out” were the most popular services and uses of BiblioTech among the young students.

In addition to the research practice benefit received by the doctoral students, the published results of the study will be equally beneficial to BiblioTech as supporting data to strengthen the case for digital libraries and future grant applications. Future research studies will include all BiblioTech sites, as well as examine the role of gaming activities and literary achievement.

- Connect Home/Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)

BiblioTech as assumed an active role in the multi-agency, federal, Connect Home initiative. The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), is collaborating with private and public-sector leaders to build local partnerships and gather commitments that will increase access to the Internet for low-income Americans. These partnerships will bring broadband, technical assistance, and digital literacy training to students living in public and assisted housing across America. (“Fact Sheet Connect Home” n.d.) For its part, BiblioTech is currently providing digital literacy education in the five identified public housing projects in San Antonio.

Future Projects

VIA Ride & Read - In the fall of 2016, we plan to launch another partnership with our local transit authority. VIA Metropolitan Transit operates busses seven days a week on 90 bus routes, providing 44 million rides across the region. Last year, VIA announced free wireless Internet service throughout its entire fleet and facilities. The new service creates a perfect opportunity for BiblioTech to co-brand and establish visible presence throughout the county. Using our library mascot owl “Techolote,” as a quick response code (QR), bus riders will be able to access a landing page to register for a card, browse our catalog and immediately check out books. Techolote will be prominently featured in co-branded advertisements and on city busses, but can also be found on everything from t-shirts to bumper stickers and key fobs. The library will be impossible to avoid.

BiblioTech East – Our third library branch will, again, be located in a resurrected public housing development on San Antonio’s eastside. This location is unique in that is the focus of significant neighborhood reinvestment. A HUD Choice Neighborhood Initiative (CNI) Grant was allocated to San Antonio Housing Authority to demolish the distressed Wheatley Courts housing complex and transform the area into a mixed-income community. In 2014, the neighborhood received a federal Promise Zone designation, which allows entities to receive special consideration in applying for federal grants.

The purpose of the designation is to revitalize distressed communities by partnering with local organizations and businesses to create jobs, increase economic security, reduce poverty,

expand educational opportunities, increase access to quality, affordable housing and improve public safety. BiblioTech's goal to provide digital resources, digital access and digital education is well aligned to these initiatives and will be a perfect fit within this environment.

BiblioTech East will occupy 4, 200 sf. in the rebuilt Wheatley Courts Housing Development. It will feature a digital reading room, two study rooms, a community room, designated children's area and makers' space. The library is scheduled to open in March, 2017.

Conclusion

Digital libraries are, admittedly, a disruptive model and one of which many, even in the library profession, are fearful. It is difficult to imagine that the digital library will supplant the traditional library, and we, at BiblioTech, make no claims that it should.

BiblioTech has been very successful in reaching the unreachable library patron; a niche population that is both larger and more varied than we realized when we started. Likewise, BiblioTech has been successful in challenging the library's role as a fixed community asset. BiblioTech stands as a testament to the scope of the public library's potential when it is unfettered by static definitions.

Acknowledgments

I acknowledge Bexar County Judge Nelson Wolff for his vision and unfailing support. I acknowledge Bexar County Manager David Smith for his commitment to excellence. Finally, I acknowledge the talented and dedicated staff of BiblioTech for bringing their best every day.

References

Data and Statistics about the United States, (n.d.). Retrieved May 2, 2015 from <https://www.usa.gov/statistics>

FACT SHEET: ConnectHome: Coming Together to Ensure Digital Opportunity for All Americans. (2015). Retrieved June 14, 2016, from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/07/15/fact-sheet-connecthome-coming-together-ensure-digital-opportunity-all>

School Report Cards. (n.d.). Retrieved May 2, 2015, from <http://tea.texas.gov/perfreport/src/index.html>