Halting the Digital Equity Act: Stop-Work Order on Bridge for Digital Divide

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ABSTRACT

This opinion piece frames the Trump administration's attempt to abruptly cancel the Digital Equity Act (DEA) as one critical battle in a much larger war to restrict access to information and limit education. In seeking to halt the DEA's historic expenditures of $2.75 billion to ensure improved broadband adoption, inclusion, and digital skills, the administration aims to perpetuate the well-documented and long-recognized digital divide. Because greater availability does not necessarily translate to greater use, adoption requires support from the "human infrastructure of broadband" (Rhinesmith and Prasad 2025), with library and information science (LIS) workers playing valuable roles.

This piece maintains that access to information in all formats is both a human right and a core professional value and that the educational role of librarians in lifelong learning and information literacy (including digital literacy) constitutes a set of professional competencies and guiding principles. It contends that library workers should share our commitment to digital equity and inclusion whenever we rally around professional values and principles to advocate for our communities. As LIS workers unite to uphold information access, foster diversity and inclusion, promote lifelong learning, and improve literacy, we must assert the vital role of libraries as community anchor institutions and our own roles as educators in the digital world.

Overview: Digital Equity in Today's Climate

The Digital Equity Act (DEA)'s historic funding of $2.75 billion was carefully designed to ensure improved high-speed internet adoption and digital skills for a wide range of historically marginalized people in every state and territory. When President Donald Trump attempted to abruptly cancel the DEA on May 9, 2025, unilaterally declaring it unconstitutional and deriding the program's "woke handouts based on race," he stopped momentous work to bridge the digital divide. This piece argues that far from being an isolated incident, the attack on digital equity and inclusion is a critical battle in a much larger war against information access and education. This politically motivated action broadly undermines diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as library and information science (LIS) values.

As a former staff member at the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), a division of the American Library Association, I developed deep knowledge of the need for and the promise of the DEA, having activated the academic library field and advocated for the

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profession and campus communities during rulemaking. Now, as an LIS educator, I endeavor for students and LIS workers to recognize that digital inclusion is not a distinct issue, but part of the larger "mosaic of interrelated issues" that constitute information policy, as exhorted by Jaeger and Taylor (2019).

Information Infrastructure in US Society

The desire for greater access to information extends back to the founding of this nation; one key reason for the American Revolution was the lack of information from the king's representatives to colonial governments and colonists (Jaeger and Taylor 2019). Historically, the federal government has taken a keen interest in shaping information infrastructure, starting with provisions in the US Constitution to establish a national post office service and postal roads, which Inouye notes are "the forerunner of today's conceptualization of universal access to information and technology" (2019, xv).

This connection between access to information and support for infrastructure was recognized in the early days of public internet service; for example, then-President Clinton and Vice President Gore prioritized funding and projects to advance the "information superhighway" (The White House n.d.). In a 1999 keynote address to the International Telecommunication Union, then-United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan noted, "People lack many things: jobs, shelter, food, health care, and drinkable water. Today, being cut off from basic telecommunications services is a hardship almost as acute as these other deprivations, and may indeed reduce the chances of finding remedies to them" (United Nations).

In the intervening decades, high-speed internet access has become increasingly necessary to participate in economic, social, cultural, and civic life. In her seminal work about information, policy, and power, Braman (2006) noted that

> conditions of access determine who can contribute information to our knowledge stores and what types of information become available to all, and they influence how informational systems are structured to minimize barriers between socioeconomic and informational classes within the social structure and to ensure that everyone can participate in public debate about public issues. (199–200)

Equitable information access, then, is about people of all classes creating information and participating in political life. While improved broadband access is often posited as a public good, there are also commercial interests at play that seek to increase consumption in our capitalist economy.

Likewise, the need for a skilled workforce is part of a neoliberal economic ideology. Braman critiqued the emphasis on information technologies rather than information literacy, noting this as one of the "failures of policy efforts to ensure a technologically literate workforce sufficient for contemporary needs has led to a reliance on immigration as a source of high-technology labor and the transfer of jobs offshore" (2006, 165). These themes of commercial interests and skilled workforce are not new and factored prominently in the "information superhighway" championed by then-Vice President Gore.

At the policy level, the DEA is designed to address both conditions of access and digital literacy. It serves the public good and supports political engagement, while also meeting the

needs of a capitalist economy by advancing digital equity and inclusion for eight marginalized populations.

Origins of the DEA

The DEA was designed in response to challenges brought into high relief during the COVID-19 pandemic. Frequent news reports exposed the vast extent of the digital divide, with people traveling miles and sitting for hours outside libraries to connect to the internet for work and school. Students in a wide range of communities could not pivot rapidly to online schooling because they lacked devices and high-speed internet at home. Libraries scrambled to create programs to lend Wi-Fi hotspots and laptops, then maintain them.

Community members of all types struggled, not because they lacked access, but because they lacked skills. Again, libraries created tutorials, workshops, explainers, and tip sheets to support community needs. The DEA was designed in response to these pandemic-era challenges to promote digital inclusion, spur greater broadband adoption, and foster digital literacy among a wide range of populations and communities.

DEA funding, appropriated by Congress, arose from community and technology experts, like those in the LIS professions, who had worked for decades to advocate for policy changes to bridge the digital divide. Through an intentional design, DEA funds were planned for three sequential stages: $60 million for states and territories to develop digital equity plans, $1.44 billion capacity grants for states and territories to implement those plans, and $1.25 billion for a national competitive grant program.

This carefully designed program filled a specific, crucial gap in federal policy. While other programs target broadband availability and affordability, the DEA focuses on high-speed internet adoption (i.e., home internet and devices) and skill building. It was developed to complement the $42.45 billion Broadband Equity Access and Deployment Program (BEAD), which primarily aims to fund partnerships to build high-speed internet infrastructure.

While BEAD primarily aims to build infrastructure, it includes a digital equity component to ensure the community has the skills and understands the benefits of its use. However, in June 2025, new program rules rescinded prior approval for "nondeployment activities" such as workforce development, telehealth, cybersecurity, and digital literacy that had been approved under the Biden administration (Quinlan 2025a). No new rules were issued to direct states about what qualifies as nondeployment activities prior to the September 4 deadline for states to submit their final BEAD proposals. Subsequently, with billions expected to be unspent, the Trump administration claims it's saving taxpayers money, although by law, this money belongs to states. (Quinlan 2025b).

The DEA recognizes that broadband deployment alone won't close the complex phenomenon that is the digital divide. Many people remain uninterested in broadband adoption, having found workarounds that feel "good enough" without an internet subscription at home. In fact, far more people reported they aren't online at home because they don't need/aren't interested in connecting than those who cited cost or lack of availability (National Telecommunications and Information Administration 2024). Thus, the DEA maximizes BEAD infrastructure investments to encourage adoption through devices, digital navigators, trainers, and more.

LIS Human Infrastructure of Broadband

The DEA acknowledges that it takes more than internet service and devices for communities to use broadband. It takes people, too. Crucially, this federal investment acknowledges the value of the labor involved—by people like library workers—as the essential "human infrastructure of broadband" to support three main services: helping people build digital skills, connecting people to broadband services, and providing access to devices and device maintenance (Rhinesmith and Prasad 2025).

Importantly, higher education institutions qualify for DEA funds, a recognition that they employ this valuable human infrastructure and that the communities they serve also need digital inclusion. Thus, academic libraries qualify for DEA funds to better serve their communities, whereas past federal programs focusing on the digital divide were targeted to K–12 and public libraries. Of note, among US academic libraries, while digital materials constitute 47 percent of collections, their use is 98.4 percent of the total, making digital inclusion and digital literacy skills essential for postsecondary students (Association of College and Research Libraries 2024).

LIS Values and Weaponization of Equity

The current attempt to cancel DEA funding seeks to perpetuate the digital divide by limiting access to information, a core professional value for the library field (American Library Association 2024), and preventing the acquisition of digital skills—related to a core competence for community lifelong learning (American Library Association 2023) and a professional principle of supporting information-literate learners (Association of College and Research Libraries 2018).

The administration's attack not only undermines professional values but also deliberately misrepresents the program's purpose. By narrowly focusing on race—although "race" or "racial" appear only twice in text of the law (Ortutay and Rush 2025)—Trump constricted the definition of equity and inclusion, thus ignoring the seven other covered populations who also need and want digital equity and inclusion: people with low incomes, language barriers, or disabilities; as well as those residing in rural areas, veterans, seniors, and incarcerated individuals. In condemning the termination, one group of elected representatives noted, "Nearly 80% of Illinois residents belong to at least one of the categories of individuals the law is designed to assist" (Office of Senator Tammy Duckworth 2025).

Halting DEA funds as "woke handouts" negates the role of experts and the voices of community members nationwide who want digital inclusion. A timeline for DEA implementation demonstrates that the years-long process has involved substantial effort and community consultation (National Digital Inclusion Alliance n.d.). This is true at the national level for the overall design of the DEA as well as for states in crafting their plans. For example, the State of Illinois's digital equity plan "was informed with the input of over 1,250 Illinoisans at more than 50 sessions across a statewide listening tour" (Office of Governor J. B. Pritzker 2025). Within LIS, associations and consortia engaged actively at national and local levels with practitioners, coalition partners, and rulemakers (Malenfant et al. 2025), and I advanced these efforts while on staff at ACRL.

The broad-based need for digital inclusion is well established, and high-speed internet access is increasingly seen as a public good and part of the universal right of information access inherent to all people as outlined in article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human

Rights (U.N. General Assembly 1948). In denouncing the current administration's action, the President of the American Library Association noted, "Broadband is a human right, and broadband access is core to modern life and success for school, work, healthcare, civic participation and social connections" (American Library Association 2025).

Broader Political Agenda

The halting of DEA funds is part of long-standing efforts within the US to deny equitable access to services, information, and education. In fact, Valentin (2025) posits this denial as a "defining feature" of our country's history and that this current halting of the DEA is part of the Trump administration's attempt to "reshape U.S. institutions, distort historical truth, and reinforce racial and economic inequality." This attempt to halt DEA funds, then, can be seen as one piece in a broader political agenda to deliberately undo policy commitments to equity and inclusion writ large, although whether it is successful remains to be seen.

Recall that the DEA would improve high-speed internet adoption and skilled use in places with low connectivity (such as rural areas), help low-income families adopt broadband, and provide digital literacy and skills training to seniors, veterans, people with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, and more. In benefiting a large proportion of the populace, it is not a niche program. A well-connected and skilled public damages the current administration's political agenda to narrow universal civic participation. By attempting to cancel DEA funds, the administration aims to perpetuate uneven broadband adoption and poor digital skills.

To illustrate this impact, work had already been well underway when DEA funding was halted, with many states moving forward on projects they had identified as priorities. For example, in Idaho, sub-grantees had already been selected for $2.3 million in awards for activities like cybersecurity classes, laptops and accessories, and tech repair support (Flandro 2025). If DEA funding is not restored, libraries will lose the capacity to run programs that include lending devices and offering training, resulting in worse community outcomes.

Whether Trump has the authority to end the program remains one of many unknowns, and twenty-two states have filed suit in opposition (Benton Institute for Broadband and Society 2025). When questioning Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick, US Senator Patty Murray—the author of the DEA—called the suspension of congressional-appropriated DEA funds illegal, to which Lutnick equivocated, "It will go through the courts and the courts will decide" (US Senate Committee on Appropriations 2025).

Rallying Call for an Uncertain Future

Braman (2021) posits that while information policy has historically developed incrementally, there are punctuations where change is radical and outcomes are uncertain. She identified three such instances in US information policy in the twenty-first century, triggered by 9/11, Trump's first election, and COVID-19.

I believe we are living in another such time of radical, punctuated change with an uncertain outcome, and we should see the attempt to cancel the DEA as part of a broader agenda to restrict information and control what we learn. It goes hand in hand with efforts to ban books, freeze research funding, cease collecting data about food insecurity, erect roadblocks to basic services like Social Security, dismantle the US Department of Education,

remove information from National Park sites and Smithsonian institutions, and redirect the Institute of Museum and Library Services' library funding to the America250 project.

As a field facing many attacks, let us remember that when we fight *against* current attempts to restrict information and control education, what we are fighting *for* matters. The ability to freely access information is a human right that includes accessing and successfully using high-speed internet. When we rally around our professional values and principles to advocate for our communities, we must incorporate digital equity and inclusion into our messaging. As vital community anchors, we cannot uphold access to information without upholding access to online information. As trusted educators, we must assert our roles as promoters of lifelong learning in a digital world and experts in teaching digital skills.

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