ABSTRACT
Our Closing the App Gap research project, examines the use of tablets, apps, and e-books in public libraries as a tool against summer reading loss in primary-grades children in underserved communities. Children in low-income families are less likely to meet important reading milestones, and they are particularly likely to suffer from summer reading loss, the setback of skills over the long summer vacation. As we already know, this loss can be addressed by summer reading programs in public libraries.

Additionally, as digital media grows in importance, the resource disparity between affluent families and lower-income families becomes even more pronounced, with a digital divide effect that shapes the experience of emergent readers. One 2011 study indicated that 55% of children eight and younger from families earning $75k or more per year have access to a smartphone, iPod/phone, or tablet, while in families earning $30,000 or less, only 22% of children have similar access. With apps a growing part of the educational landscape, increased access is advantageous.

This approach brings new tools in the fight against summer reading loss, enhances technological literacy, and mitigates the effect of the digital divide on children in lower-income families. Our poster will discuss the various aspects of our research, including: our greatest challenges, the creation of a model that can help other public libraries use apps and tablets with children, our proposed multi-site project that builds on what we’ve learned, and the potential ramifications of closing the digital divide and improving literacy for every child.

KEYWORDS
Ebooks, tablets, apps, social informatics

INTRODUCTION
Closing the App Gap engages with experts in scholarship and practice to define the public library’s role in selecting and providing existing digital media for younger children, especially those primary-grades children in low-income communities who are most in need of intervention, whose access to media at home is limited, and for whom summer often means a loss of skills. This research draws on both the historic involvement of public libraries in literacy, through summer reading programs and ongoing support, and their long-term role as providers and facilitators for communities impacted by disparate access to technology. Tablet use is becoming more common in schools and libraries, with compelling apps and e-books engaging young learners with new opportunities, but libraries are still exploring ways to meet the challenges and maximize the benefits of incorporating these technologies into their collections and services.

Closing the App Gap contributes to a foundational understanding of this aspect of library service by devising and assessing models for the use of apps and tablets with children within the public library setting. In our planning grant project, we are compiling relevant data and surveying existing practices, collating and assessing review sources of apps and e-books, and identifying partners and stakeholders in order to design a subsequent multi-site project involving the use of tablets in summer reading programs in underserved communities. A key part of our planning phase is our pilot study, which is currently being conducted at the Douglass Branch Library of Champaign.

BACKGROUND
According to the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, “Reading proficiency by third grade is the most important predictor of high school graduation and career success.” For many children, summer vacation, with its absence of classroom education and school resources, results in a decline in reading proficiency and loss of essential literacy skills. The effects of this summer reading setback are more harshly felt by children of lower economic circumstances, as evidenced by lower scores on standardized tests, more exaggerated reading regression from spring to fall, and a widening achievement gap between children of means and those without. A 2010 study showed 77% of “economically advantaged” students in fourth grade, a crucial stage for developing readers, exceeded basic levels of proficiency, while only 46% of economically disadvantaged students
achieved an average level of proficiency (Allington 2010). Statistical studies also show that students of lower means own significantly fewer books than their more affluent peers, further discouraging the development of reading skills during summer vacation. (Kim 2007).

The public library plays a unique role in summer education. Summer reading programs are among the most popular library activities for youth, and they are also the most well documented and measured activity in youth service. Evidence of the educational boost of summer reading programs is most recently documented in the impressive Dominican Study, which focused on low-income families participating in summer reading programs. It revealed that a public library’s summer reading program was more than an antidote to summer learning loss; it also put participants at an average 52 Lexile points, a notable reading level difference, ahead of non-participants. Findings showed that students participating in their local summer reading program scored higher on reading tests at the start of fourth grade and did not experience summer learning loss. A survey of fourth grade teachers indicated that students participating in summer reading programs had a better attitude about reading, read beyond expectations, and had more confidence and enthusiasm in the classroom (Roman 2010). Public libraries are embracing the possibilities such technology offers, as evidenced by ALA’s Office for Informational Technology Policy 2010 brief titled “There’s an App for That! Libraries and Mobile Technology: An Introduction to Public Policy Considerations,” which identifies the necessity and challenges of supporting patrons’ needs in this area.

PARTNERSHIP
Our partner, the Douglass Branch of the Champaign Library, is an excellent example of a library working to close the digital divide. The branch serves a predominately African-American, low-income neighborhood in northeast Champaign. Data from census tract 2 in Champaign County, the area served by the branch, shows that 37% of residents are below the poverty level and 58% of households have an annual income of less than $25,000. According to 2000 census data, 82% of residents served by the branch have a high school education or less and 40% are not employed. Currently, the branch has no tablets or personal electronic devices for young patrons; while the library possesses two Kindles available for checkout, the devices currently contain only adult titles. Our project will enable this library to further expand its resources and serve its constituency.

PILOT STUDY
Our pilot study consists of three programming sessions per week, Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays, beginning June 9, 2014. Each session introduces an app or multiple apps and invites children to explore the apps, read, and play. All apps have been extensively vetted and selected for use with this audience, taking into account quality, educational potential, literary merit, literacy-support potential, and the diversity of the characters represented in apps and stories. Naturalistic observation is used to document and understand children’s involvement with the apps and the programs. Pre- and post-test reading scores for program participants will allow us to assess whether these programs have contributed to summer reading gains or skills maintenance.

This pilot project will provide our partner library with an additional inviting facet for summer reading and allow its patrons to gain hands-on experience exploring tablet computers and book apps. Its staff will gain additional knowledge of how young readers engage with interactive media and how to provide reader’s advisory to assist in selection of apps for young children. Use statistics and library attendance numbers will be counted and assessed in comparison to other times and programs, and the planning phase will identify additional metrics relevant to the issue of summer reading loss.

CONCLUSION
Overall, we see a need to bring to the discussion an investigation on the value of the public library’s role in providing and selecting existing digital media for younger children, especially those primary-grades children in low-income communities who are most in need of intervention, whose access to media at home is limited, and for whose summer often means a loss of skills.

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REFERENCES


