Development of the information "superhighway" has spawned a number of political, economic, and educational issues and has raised concerns that information inequities are increasing the polarization of society. Among the economic and political issues/concerns that have been raised are the following: whether information is a commodity or a public resource; whether commercial providers can be relied on to extend services to high-cost or remote areas; whether technology will facilitate or deter development of a direct participatory democracy; and what constitutes basic information rights and how those rights should be distributed. In the area of education, the information revolution and creation of the information superhighway have necessitated redefinition of the concept of literacy. Also needed are adult and career education and training conducted using up-to-date equipment, lifelong training to keep up with rapid technological change, information literacy programs for adult basic education and homeless learners, and programs to reduce computer anxiety. (An annotated list of 28 print resources dealing with political, economic, and educational aspects of the issue of access to information is included.) (MN)
Access to Information:  
To Have and Have Not 
Trends and Issues Alerts

Sandra Kerka
Access to Information: To Have and Have Not

Beneath all the "superhighway" metaphors and the cyberspace hype lie some serious issues about the social and economic impact of the so-called information revolution. Although computers seem to be everywhere, the people owning or having access to them at home, school, or work fall into certain categories: 30% of the U.S. population (Ratan 1995); 74% of those with incomes over $75,000 ("TechnoMania" 1995); 26.9 million whites, 1.5 million blacks (Stuart 1994); 49% of college graduates with children, 17% of high school graduates with children (Furger 1994); and 26% white children, 10.6% black children, 9.6% Hispanic children ("Special Topic Issue" 1994). Not only are there disparities in computer ownership but also in the capacity to access online information: only 13% ever go online, only 2% for 1 hour per day ("TechnoMania" 1995). Phone lines are essential for online services, but 7 million U.S. homes (Ratan 1995) and half the world's population (Holmes 1993) have no phones. Few rural areas have fiber optics or access to an Internet node (National Public Telecomputing Network 1994). Why does it matter? Access to information is being called "the civil rights and economic rights issue of the 21st century" (Stuart 1994, p. 73). A number of political, economic, and educational issues are raising concerns that information inequities are increasing the polarization of society.

Economics. Is information a commodity or a public resource? There is a rush to commercialize or privatize the Internet, and the National Information Infrastructure (NII) legislation promotes competition while asserting the government's duty to ensure availability of information resources at affordable prices (National Telecommunications and Information Administration 1994). Commercial providers are less likely to offer less economically viable services and to extend service to high-cost or remote areas. Electronic redlining—wiring the most profitable areas first or exclusively—is a reality (Ratan 1995; Stuart 1994). Other economic issues include provider concerns for liability (Perritt 1992); better employment opportunities and earnings for those adept at technology ("TechnoMania" 1995); and quality of access—some areas lack good connections, sophisticated search tools are expensive (Baker 1994; Bollag 1991).

Politics. Some envision technology as a way to bring about direct, participatory democracy. However, as more and more government information and elected representatives go online, people without access may be further denied a political voice. The NII promotes the conflicting goals of competition and universal service (a basic set of essential services for civic, economic, and social participation). Consensus must be reached on what constitutes these basic information rights and how to distribute information resources equitably (Doctor 1994; Weingarten 1994). Solutions proposed include guaranteed public spaces or "electronic commons" (DeLoughry 1993); minimum level of service subsidized by contributions from telecommunications providers (Lewyn 1994); and an expanded role for public libraries, traditional providers of information for all (Kranich 1993; Library of Congress 1993).

Education. The concept of literacy in an information-based democratic society must be redefined (Mason 1994). Above and beyond access, quality of use depends on education and training (Kazlauskas and Lehl 1993). Although many schools have computers, they are often outdated or there are too few, especially in poorer schools. Parents and community play an important role, because computer proficiency is strongly related to access outside of school ("Special Topic Issue" 1994). Information anxiety is another barrier to access: besides haves and have-nots are the choose-nots who resist using technology (as many as 55% classified as "technophobes" in a recent survey ["TechnoMania" 1995]). The attitude of others is "I don't mind that the rest of the world passes me by as long as I can still earn a living" (ibid., p. 53). Adult and career education have important roles to play: continuous and lifelong training to keep up with rapid technological change; programs to entice choose-nots and technophobes; information literacy for adult basic education and homeless learners; and, because computer anxiety often results from early conditioning, emphasis on sex equity in computer use and information skills as essential career skills.

Resources


Furger, R. "Unequal Distribution: The Information Haves and Have-nots." FC World 12 (September 1994): 30, 32.
Access to the information superhighway may determine the basic ability to function in a democratic culture. Local, small-scale efforts are being made to serve those without home computers.


Theme articles include "Don't Give Us the Grand Canyon to Cross" (Merrifield, Bell); "Country Roads and Superhighways" (Whitson, Day); and "The Promise of the Telecommunications Superhighway" (McCullough, McCullough).

Schiller, H. I. "The 'Information Highway': Public Way or Private Road?" Nation, July 12, 1993, pp. 64-66.

The information superhighway will be an almost exclusively privatized landscape. The focus may be on "marketing and pacification."


Blacks are nearly absent from ownership of capital in the information society and are far less likely to be equipped to use and manipulate information.


Addresses the rights and responsibilities of educational institutions and citizens to computing and information resources. Suggests that, like libraries, institutions have the right to allocate access based on their mission and financial constraints.


Includes "Access to Information Technologies among School-Age Children" (Martinez) and "The PEN Project in Santa Monica: Interactive Communication, Equality, and Political Action" (Rogers, Collins-Jarvis, Schmitz).


In deciding what constitutes basic information services, policymakers should consider what is the information equivalent of dialtone telephone service.


The Federal Communications Commission is being asked to investigate the practice of electronic redlining—avoiding high cost or less profitable areas to wire with fiber optics.


Includes "The Internet! Bah!" (Stoll); "The Haves and Have-nots" (Hancock et al.); "Putting Your Best Fear Forward" (Marriott, Gegas); and "The Myth of Cyber Inequality" (Samuelson).


Discusses access to the physical infrastructure, access as a service provider, information rights (privacy, intellectual property, freedom of speech), and public/private issues.

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