Online Society and the Power of Knowing

Digital Citizenship: The Internet, Society, and Participation
By Karen Mossberger, Caroline J. Tolbert and Ramona S. McNeal
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By Elaine Hicks

My girlfriend picked me up to have dinner after a long day of reading about digital citizenship. “What did you learn about today?” she asked, not expecting my reply to be “the traditions of citizenship: Lockean liberalism, civic republicanism and ascriptive hierarchy”. She roared with laughter. “Librarians have to know that?” These concepts described by the American political scientist (and native son), Rogers Smith are a fundamental building block in understanding the relationship between Internet use and citizenship. As librarians and information specialists of all varieties, we need to be aware of these concepts, how they are active in the lives of our patrons and institutions, and participate in developing public policies to assure that as political and civic institutions embrace information technology to reach their constituencies, they accommodate the needs of minority, poor and less-educated among us who, perhaps, have the most to gain—economically and politically—from digital citizenship (daily Internet use).

Premise of book:

The book, Digital Citizenship: The Internet, Society and Participation [1], updates previous collective research on virtual inequality to demonstrate the impact of exclusion from online society among disadvantaged Americans.[2] What the authors Karen Mossberger, Caroline Tolbert and Ramona McNeal learned about internet access and use patterns is as interesting as how they learned it. Using research methods unique to them, they deconstruct recent national opinion surveys using multivariate methods of data analysis to develop a nuanced understanding of patterns of Internet access and use among disadvantaged subgroups of Americans. They found that not all disparities are the same, a distinction crucial for appropriate public policies.

The researchers focus on how the Internet is used in economic and political participation of because of its close association with citizenship. Using data, they argue that poor minorities (African American and Latino) confront the greatest barriers to digital citizenship because they are the most likely of all Americans to live in communities with inadequate educational resources, achieve lower rates of educational attainment and to be excluded from technology-intensive jobs. While different predictors of digital citizenship shape patterns of access and use within subgroups of the population (African American, Latino, less-educated and poor) some core factors emerge repeatedly and in every case, education, income, race, and ethnicity define the chances for individuals in these groups to develop digital citizenship.

The authors examine three aspects of digital citizenship: the effects of the Internet on the equality of opportunity in the marketplace (economics); the impact of the Internet on the ability to participate as democratic citizens (sociology, political science); and inclusion in prevailing forms of communication through regular and effective use (information science). They demonstrate how Internet use is integral to citizenship in the information age using three traditions of citizenship described by Rogers Smith and Rodney Hero: Lockean liberalism, civic republicanism, and ascriptive hierarchy. [3, 4]The concept of ascriptive hierarchy describes systematic exclusion from the goods of full citizenship based on ascriptive characteristics such as race, gender, or ethnicity.
The authors believe that the online disparities they found deepen existing inequalities and also prevent disadvantaged citizens from participating in goods of full citizenship. They suggest that public policies which have historically supported equality of opportunity (vs. outcomes) should be re-packaged to broaden home access—free municipal broadband—and skill development—training and education—to provide contemporary opportunities to participate in the economy and politics. They believe this is consistent with equality of opportunity (liberalism), civil rights (as an antidote to ascriptive hierarchy) and democratic governance (civic republicanism).

**Data analysis methods find patterns**

Studies on the social impact of the Internet and the digital divide use a variety of statistical methods of analysis, such as descriptive statistics, case studies, and qualitative data (narratives from interviews) to understand trends. In the case of interviews used by social scientists to provide insights about some individuals, the authors question if the findings are representative. To better understand what demographic, economic, and geographic factors predict digital citizenship, they analyze data from large sets of recent national opinion surveys such as the Pew Internet and American Life Project, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, the American National Election Studies (NES) and the Computer and Internet Use Supplement to the October 2003 Current Population Survey of the U.S. Census Bureau (CPS). They use multivariate regression models to isolate factors which encourage technology use for disadvantaged groups of Americans. With this approach, they believe their findings are more accurate than those found using standard statistical methods, plus their methods provide controls for endogeneity (selection bias and changes explained by the model itself) to predict what factors increase technology access and use for both the general population and subgroups of disadvantaged Americans in which they were interested: African Americans, Latinos, less-educated individuals, younger and older people.

**Daily use**

A basic premise of the research is that measuring access alone may neglect important variations in technology use and skill. Frequency of use is a better measure of capacity for digital citizenship than occasional use or access alone. It implies basic skills for using technology, and as individuals gain experience, they deepen their activities online, undertaking more complex tasks while also using the Internet for work, study, or information search rather than just entertainment. Further, digital skills are important for economic opportunity and political participation regardless of age. To document daily use among less-educated, minority, and poor Americans, the authors used surveys from the Pew Internet and the American Life Project which showed that in 2003, 73% of Americans say they go online at least occasionally in some setting[5]. While this information is valuable, it neither informs how many Americans are digital citizens nor describes patterns of access and use which could guide policy makers in encouraging technology use for disadvantaged groups of Americans. Therefore, the researchers selected the 2003 CPS supplement which has 103,000 respondents and conducted separate multivariate analyses for disadvantaged subgroups. Of the total sample, 10% (N=10,113) reported being Hispanic and almost 10% (N=9,920) reported being African American. With this large number of minority respondents, they were able to analyze each group separately.

**The Latino subgroup: survey research for appropriate policies**

While the authors discuss internet access and use for a variety of subgroups, their data on Latinos is especially important because they are the largest minority in the U.S. with larger families and higher birthrates, their share of the population is increasing dramatically. The Census
Bureau estimates that the Hispanic population is projected to nearly triple; almost one in three U.S. residents would be Hispanic in 2050. [6] However, they have the lowest educational attainment rates of any minority group. [7] Researcher Robert Fairlie found in 2004 that Mexican Americans had the lowest rates of access due, in part, to language barriers[8]. The author’s survey research data on economic opportunity, access and use among Latinos could help policy-makers assure that appropriate education and training to complement municipal broadband access is available.

Latinos are more likely than other subgroups to believe that you need the Internet to keep up with the times and on the whole and their attitudes about information technology are optimistic. Home access is very important because it increases the likelihood of daily use and subsequent skill development. Occupation, age, marriage, and residence all affect home access rates. Unlike for African Americans, occupation matters in predicting home internet access for Latinos. The researchers found that Latinos working in professional, management, sales, and secretarial occupations all have an increased probability of home access, resembling access patterns for general population. The authors believe that this suggests that African Americans may face more discrimination in the labor market than Latinos, particularly within white-collar occupations. Latinos with only a high school degree have a lower probability of home access than similarly situated whites with only a high school degree. Young Latinos are not more likely to have home access than older Latinos. Having a child increases the likelihood of home access. No prior research had demonstrated the economic benefits of digital skills for less-educated workers so the authors used individual earnings data to determine that a 16.99% wage premium existed for using the Internet at work among Latino men.

As regards to Internet use, Latinos had only an 18% probability of daily internet use as compared with 34% for whites, a 15% gap between Latinos and whites. African Americans had a 21% probability of daily use. In previous research, the authors determined that place of residence matters because it can influence opportunities to learn about technology in schools, public access sites, social networks, and jobs. [2] In their current work, they found that Latinos residing in urban areas were less likely to use the Internet daily compared to those residing in rural and suburban areas but it is not clear why. Perhaps it relates to the urban communities themselves which lack technology infrastructure or maybe it is about urban occupations. However, if public policies are created to promote access in cities, such as those proposed or experimented with in Chicago and Philadelphia, Latinos may be less likely to use it because they lack skills to use computers and the Internet even though it may be available. Marriage is related to a decreased frequency of use among Latino—the reverse of the general population. The authors cited a Pew study which identified language as a significant influence on Internet use among Latinos. This has implications for appropriate literacy education. Gender is not significant for digital citizenship for Latinos, but Latinas are not more likely to be frequent Internet users than men, or visa versa, unlike African Americans. In terms of political engagement among Latinos, the authors found a positive relationship between reading online news and political interest across all the years they examined, but not increased political knowledge. The implication they derive is that while online news generates interest, the lack of education among Latinos in general may hinder the knowledge acquired. Another interesting thing they found was that increases in the level of interest in political news is highest in presidential election years.

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Part II
Online society: 21st century medium for opinion-development
John Stuart Mill would have loved the Internet! What a great way for people to freely express their opinions! What a great way to be contrary—to disagree with the prevailing political party! What a great way for truth to find its way in the world. But what if whole classes of people are excluded from participating from the progress that is otherwise being made? A key to understanding how the Information Age is working—or could work for—minority, less-educated and poor Americans, is to be aware of ascriptive hierarchy—exclusion of large segments of the population from full citizenship based on ascriptive characteristics such as race, gender, or ethnicity.

**Exclusion from progress is not new**

Exclusion in the context of diffusion of knowledge is a contemporary problem. Mid-19th century British members of the intellectual class were not poisoned for their heretical ideas like Socrates in 399 B.C, but they suffered “intellectual pacification”, a “sacrifice of the entire moral courage of the human mind”. [9]. These men could not express oppositional ideas if they hoped to maintain their social and economic status and prosper from the goods of their society. They had to keep their general principles and the grounds of their convictions private, acting more as “time-servers for truth” than men with conviction. [9] John Stuart Mill, writing in his landmark 1869 essay, *On Liberty*, recounted the absurd instance of an unfortunate jurist who honestly declared to the court that he had no theological belief. He was subsequently insulted and rejected from duty. The society which gave him his right to judge the actions of his peers (a jury trial) also denied his right to participate if he spoke the truth. The only people who could risk the consequences of the free expression of their opinions were those who were fortunate enough to have nothing to fear—either economically or socially—from stating their mind. Everyone else was subject to persecution [9] The point is that knowledge cannot advance if societal structure and prevailing mores prevent opposing opinions.

**Exclusion from online society: perpetuation of ascriptive hierarchy**

Those people who are being excluded from 21st century online society are those citizens who suffer from poverty, illiteracy, and unequal educational opportunities: minority, less-educated and poor people in both urban and rural landscapes—and yet they have formal and legal rights as citizens. Mills did not discuss people in terms of race or ethnicity. Rather, he was concerned about the persecution of the intellectual class, “dissidents afflicted with the malady of thought”. [9] He feared that the world was losing promising intellects, average people with original ideas, through the systematic prevention of the expression of original ideas, which did not conform to the prevailing ideas of people nor the institutions they controlled. In his mind, it was worse to have a true opinion which one did not articulate for oneself than to have a flawed original opinion born of study. Ascriptive hierarchy in 21st century America is documented by the authors in terms of economic and political participation and exclusion from access to and daily use of the Internet is preventing our average citizens—African-American, Latino, less-educated and poor Americans—from achieving their intellectual potential.

One would think that we had progressed since the society of Mill, yet even now in the Year of Our Lord, 2008, Americans who formally and legally possess political, civic and social rights of citizenship are deprived of occupational advancement, jobs with adequate real wages, quality education and political participation to create policies which would remove institutional barriers to full citizenship. The costs of exclusion from online society online raise fundamental questions of empowerment and participation. Fortunately, a characteristic of knowledge is that it advances and
truth prevails in the course of time. Socratic philosophy continues to inform intellectual development; while mid-19th century British social and institutional intolerance [of heretical opinion] slowed down the diffusion of knowledge by driving it underground, witness the rise of 15 American academic research institutions in the early part of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century[10]

**Public good, education, and universal access to the internet**

The authors conclude that utilitarian philosophy would justify the costs of universal access which extends broadband to all areas of the country and makes high-speed connections affordable for all; internet skill development and education (literacy development) in the interest of the greater social good, the means justifying the ends. This idea derives from John Stuart Mill’s idea that when deciding what to do, we should give equal consideration to all concerned which has been termed the “public”, or “social” good.[11] Mill believed that every one born in a civilized country should enjoy happiness: tranquility and excitement and a sincere interest in the public good. Only bad laws (policies) or a subjection to the will of others could the person of his liberty to use the sources of happiness within his reach (read: internet access, skills and education).[11].

The great Brazilian literacy educator, Paulo Friere, writing almost 100 years after Mill on a different continent and in a different culture, embraced a non-orthodox form of what could be considered liberation theology. His standpoint was that the act of knowing, through customary practice, is how men are able to look critically at the world, reflect and act upon the reality they find. He advocated a theory and practice based upon authentic dialogue between teachers and adult learners which centered upon the learners' existential situations and lead not only to their acquisition of literacy skills, but also, and more importantly, to their awareness of their right as human beings to transform reality. Becoming literate, then, meant far more than learning to decode the written representation of a sound system. It is truly an act of knowing, through which a person is able to look critically at the world he/she lives in, and to reflect and act upon it.[12]

The authors argue with their data that the Internet has the potential to benefit society as a whole and that access to it, technical skill in using it and the requisite literacy to understand it facilitate citizenship. It is in the interest of the public good that Latino communities have access to wireless mobile broadband service, adequate training for skill development and a good education to assure daily use of the internet. If Paulo Friere were alive to witness the power of the Internet, I believe that he would say that literacy education would be conducted online in the context of the lives of the [adult] students. Mill would believe that if the internet is required for citizenship, that all citizens have access to it and he would be supported by our great statesman and public education advocate, Thomas Jefferson.

Karen Mossberger specializes in research and teaching on local government and public policy as Associate Professor in the Graduate Program in Public Administration, College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs at the University of Illinois at Chicago. What makes her work so valuable to the dialog on the digital divide is her research methodology. She reconstructs national opinion surveys to establish that age-old patterns of exclusion exist for how people-and which people-use the internet. She recently co-authored a paper on e-government[13] and is developing neighborhood-level internet access and use data for the Chicago Digital Excellence Project. Also she is investigating suburban government capacity to meet human services needs with the shifting geography of poverty in the Chicago area.

References


