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Information Policy

5/15/18

Reading Reflection Access and Affordability

In an age of rapid technological expansion, coupled with an increased adoption of a paradigm that favors connectivity and knowledge dissemination over isolation, it is difficult to take a step back and analyze the world through a veil of ignorance. Knowledge is said to be power, but it isn’t a God-given decree bestowed upon individuals at birth. No, knowledge is acquired, and enhanced, unlike natural intellect, from the resources with which we have at our disposal. It’s incredibly easy to compartmentalize aspects of your life, especially global issues that may not have a direct impact on your own fortune, but to better understand the concepts of universal service, access, and affordability as they relate to today’s digital landscape, that is what must be done. A utilitarian viewpoint, which favors the needs of the many over the needs of the few, simply leads to a systematic perpetuation of an existing problem. Not to mention the contradictions present when observing Freedom of Information Acts across the free-world: “Information is power. Freedom of Information and Freedom of Expression work against the concentration of information within the hands of a few” [4]. In this paper, I will explore the restrictions and prohibitors of a digitally-infused future as it relates to low income users. I choose low income users because, subjectively, it seems like if a change were to be instituted in some manner, it would be probable that the density of segments would lead to favoritism.

It seems like everything is moving towards a digital solution. Things that were once staples in US culture are being refactored into binarized representations of yesteryear in hopes of cost reduction and profit maximization. Logically, the solution works. You adapt to the times and adopt policies of creative destruction to optimize and disrupt the status quo. The world moves on, albeit quicker and with fewer constraints, but some suffer and are left behind. Those people are often the ones that can’t afford to adapt at the same rate as the rest of society. I’d like to focus on the issue from the root, so I’ll be discussing the government operation of education, namely in an academic context, as a government operation that low income people may have difficulty engaging with and accessing because of their status. Starting from the academic side, the statistics note that “the wealthiest 10 percent of U.S. school districts spend nearly 10 times more than the poorest 10 percent” [5]. It is difficult to argue against the notion that more funding might lead to more qualified personnel, materials, and curriculum that might be better prepare low income youth for life beyond school. This is a divide in information transference not necessarily related to the rise of information and communication technology systems, but certainly something that is a precursor to an inability to engage and network within the framework of the existing scene. If instead, we look at education as a more widespread concept of knowledge acquisition that deviates from a standard academic curriculum, the problem becomes larger. The segment of low income users and their deprivation of necessary resources doesn’t end after one exits traditional schooling, and can often times be a deterrent from their ability to function adequately within an ever-changing environment.

Because the prompt refers to education as a government operation, I’m going to assume that it may be about the expansion and consumption of digital tools within the academic framework. This is where I must contrast from my own anecdotal experience. When I was in high school, libraries full of computers were the status quo in my area, but I know that has since moved toward mobile devices in classrooms and other mechanisms and learning instruments that facilitate and prepare youth for jobs after high school. I’d posit that the resources were unnecessary at the time, as we lacked proper instruction on their utility within the environment, and access to external resources was heavily monitored and nullified. Minimally invasive education, with limited access and training, proves to be minimally effective [1]. There were, however, courses within the standard curriculum that focused on training and preparing students to understand some of the basic functions of computers and their viability within an external environment. It could be argued that self-exploration of technology may move the needle on adaptiveness and knowledge more than a traditional system, but the fact of the matter is that the basics of the technological resolution were instilled in me as a youth, and opened the pathways toward that exploration. In short, I believe that the digital divide is spurred by a contrast in curriculum from well-funded districts to poorly-funded districts. This doesn’t lie exclusively with the ability of teachers to convey and articulate insights into the outer workings of the world, but more so with their lack of resources to do.

When I talk about resources here I’m referring mainly to internet connectivity, hardware, and suitable domain knowledge. There are current policies and initiatives in place to ensure that access to the internet is considered a basic human right for students. The E-Rate program, effected in 1998, helps schools and libraries to obtain affordable broadband [6]. Discounts range in reflection of the level of poverty of a school or library within specific areas, and speeds typically measure around the US household average. This sounds fine and dandy at the surface level, but it’s made aware that broadband connection is often time served to hundreds of users, diminishing some of the nobility of the act [7]. An article states that a lower income district provides one computer per 40 students, while the other end of the spectrum sees nearly 1 computer per student available for access [8]. Already we see remnants of the digital divide, which caters subconsciously to those more fortunate. Not only looking at this from the scope of scholastic resources, we also must account for the resources a student has available to them at home. Without viable resources conducive to a modern, forward-thinking movement, curriculums must be tapered to adjust for circumstance. In a well-funded area, school work may be more reliant on technology, which is more in line with the changing culture of the workforce, but poorly funded areas stagnate. With lesser access to resources, individuals in poorer areas may be unable to distinguish themselves from some of their more fortunate peers when applying for college or heading into the workforce.

From a policy perspective, it is important to look at this from a level of income rather than race. “Internet access among Blacks and other minorities varies tremendously by income group” [1]. It could further the digital divide, and the racial divide, if generalization and stereotypes ensued, and groups of people were thought to be more or less digitally literate based on their complexion. The reason behind the sharp educational distinctions between the two classes of schooling systems boils down to funding. School districts are often funded by the local property taxes within their proximity – In a high-income area, with homes worth well above the median price, it is much easier to raise money and allocate additional resources to students [9]. With funding mainly taking place at the local level without revenue sharing implications, it is difficult to enact a solution. There have been several cases, some reaching the Supreme Court, that have countered that inequitable funding of schools is unconstitutional. These were struck down and responsibility was pushed back towards the state level [9]. E-Rate, mentioned earlier as a system for low income districts to gain access to broadband, is a start, but it still isn’t impartial. An NBER study points to a causal relationship between school finance reforms and an increased level of achievement amongst students of the sampled schools [10]. Again, it’s about money, and a lack of disposable income by some districts due to impoverished living conditions and lesser overall household values. The NBER paper studies the impact of a widely adopted shift from funding equity to funding adequacy, which sparked a shift in ideology. Low income schools were required by their respective states to provide adequate levels of funding to districts regardless of equity. For example, low income districts might receive a larger absolute pool than high income districts depending on the context of adequacy. The study goes on to say that, in adopted states, the spending per student was nearly 10% higher in low income districts. As a result, it was noted that the gap between standardized testing scores within adopted states was decreased, while uninitiated states suffered a larger divide [11]. Obviously, this is not to be seen as a cure-all, but the case of Rose v. Council for Better Education, if adopted by the remaining states, would be a start. Access is driven by money, and money is distributed, generally, amongst the top tiers of any economy. Those in the lower brackets of any socioeconomic engine are deemed casualties of change, and that isn’t representative of equal opportunity.

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