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IST 618

Reading reflection: access and affordability

*Introduction*

While the internet age boasts the tremendous upside of raising all boats, purportedly democratizing the tools of wealth generation, the lived experience of those individuals left out of the digital revolution points to a different conclusion. Due to issues of inaccessibility, the digitization of certain services has compounded structural inequalities that already existed. During the past seven months especially, government agencies, businesses, and not-for-profit organizations alike have had to make rapid adjustments amidst the public health crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes have served only to exacerbate digital barriers that keep marginalized individuals from receiving the services they need. One group that is disproportionately affected by these issues of information access are New Americans, largely due to the intersection of language barriers, economic hardship, and other factors. While individuals with variable internet access have had many challenges in navigating basic services during the course of this year, one particular challenge has been the delivery of public education since the disruption to the traditional in-person school day in March. This reflection aims to evaluate the challenges immigrants, refugees, and their children face in the pursuit of education amid a newly remote learning environment, as well as provide an ethically framed solution to the issue at hand.

*Existing barriers to internet access*

Before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the societal disruption that has occurred in its wake, there was already a deep “digital divide” in the United States (Aschoff, 2020). This term has been used to describe the gulf between the levels of information access of this country’s poor and its middle and upper classes. According to the FCC,

“19 million Americans—6 percent of the population—still lack access to fixed broadband service at threshold speeds. In rural areas, nearly one-fourth of the population —14.5 million people—lack access to this service. In tribal areas, nearly one-third of the population lacks access. Even in areas where broadband is available, approximately 100 million Americans still do not subscribe.” (Eighth broadband progress report, 2012)

While unavailability and disinterest are certainly explanations for a portion of these individuals, an unfortunate but common motivating factor in declining internet service is that the cost is prohibitive for many families. Examples abound, as in New York City, where in 2016, a quarter of all households lacked internet. Among families earning less than $20,000, that rate was fifty percent (Marx, 2016). Here in Syracuse, the 13,000 households lacking internet have earned our city a spot as the tenth worst in the country for digital connectivity. Nearly half of households lack high-speed broadband, with households in the *hundreds* still using a dial-up modem connection (Baker, 2019). One particular population that is uniquely vulnerable, both here in Syracuse and nationally, are New Americans, immigrants, and refugees. As of 2018, nearly one in three immigrant households nationwide lacked personal broadband internet access. At the middle of the Venn diagram of people with low incomes and immigrants, that same figure was nearly 42% (Back to school: A look at the internet access gap, 2020). In fact, according to a 2016 study, one in five immigrant Latinx parents had never used the internet. That same study showed that immigrant Latinx households were 18 percent less likely to have a household computer (Cherewka, 2020). This lack of connectivity can exacerbate existing structural inequities: the transportation insecure are also unable to hail rides or check bus schedules online, the unemployed or underemployed are relegated to the print classified ads in their job search, among other critical productive activities.

*Remote learning amidst the public health crisis*

Since March 2020, businesses and government services have migrated even more of their amenities and procedures online. Perhaps the sector with the starkest shift was the education field, with schools, colleges, and universities all moving online. The transition to a remote learning model for residential students, working parents, and teachers themselves represented a significant and disruptive change. However, for those students who lack consistent access to the internet at home, the move from the classroom to the Zoom meeting amounted to a serious obstacle. While the novelty of the unfolding situation has made research and measurement less widely available, anecdotal reports from immigrant parents have pointed toward a “homework gap” among students with limited internet access (Acevedo, 2020). Yet even after internet access is accounted for, the challenges around providing homework assistance and serving as a tutor to their children, in the absence of one-to-one support, is more complicated for immigrant parents. Over-represented in frontline pandemic occupations, immigrant parents are necessarily outside of the home more frequently than their native-born counterparts (Cherewka, 2020). Additionally, many immigrant parents are English language learners themselves, which can make homework assistance even more challenging. The COVID-19 crisis has laid bare some of the structural barriers to electronic inclusion.

*Ethically framed solutions*

While information access is but one missing link in our austerity environment, where so many Americans confront precarity daily, an equitable distribution of information resources is long overdue. Around the world, and even in some domestic spheres, information access advocates are making the case for internet access as a human right. After all, if this pandemic crisis has proven anything, it is that access to the internet is a crucial part of leading a productive and connected life. When public schools first moved to a remote setting, ISPs were quick to extend free access to those families who could not afford home internet (Moriarty, 2020). Some arrangements were limited in their timeline, others pledged support until the end of the crisis. However, the February 2020 digital landscape already required information access to be a fully participatory member of society (Aschoff, 2020). By the time the pandemic recedes, the imperative for internet access will be even greater.

In the United Kingdom, a public broadband company providing universal free broadband to the entire country formed an important part of the Labour Party’s platform (Tarnoff, 2019). While Boris Johnson’s Conservatives ultimately held power and gained seats in last year’s election, the issue’s salience bodes well for similar efforts in the future. With the internet long having been declared a human right by the United Nations, expanding its access and affordability to all is essential to bridging the digital divide (Howell & West, 2016). In the United States, similar efforts might be undertaken to expand access. While municipally owned broadband networks might be a better way to guarantee access and affordability, even some sort of public-private partnership that commits itself to resolving inequities could be a significant first step in expanding access for all. Advocacy for universal internet programs employ a “Rights Approach” ethical framework (Velasquez, Andre, Shanks, & Meyer). By recognizing society’s obligation to respect the rights and dignity of all people, programs of this nature acknowledge that the needs of individuals to access information services take precedent over the monopolistic tendencies of ISPs.

*Conclusion*

As we enter the eighth month of the pandemic period in the United States, teachers are now being informed by their administrators that a hybrid model of education that includes remote instruction will likely continue into the 2021 – 2022 academic year. Needless to say, the disruptions resulting from the COVID-19 crisis will not resolve themselves in the near term. Many existing barriers to societal inclusion are born out of inequities in the way that online information access is distributed. These inequities have had a marked impact on the way that children have accessed their educational resources during the current and prior academic years, a fact that has been particularly true for children of New Americans, immigrants, and refugees. It is clear that national policies advocating for wider access to internet, either through municipally owned broadband networks, or public investment in privately owned networks are long overdue. Progress that is made towards these goals during the pandemic period will have a lasting impact on societal inclusion and productive participation, even once the public health crisis has receded.

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