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Digital Citizenship: The Internet, Society, and Participation

Allegra Swift

Claremont Colleges Library

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Digital Citizenship: The Internet, Society, and Participation. Karen Mossberger, Caroline J. Tolbert, and Ramona S. McNeal. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; 2008: 216 pp. \$19.00. (ISBN: 978-0-262-13485-9)

The Internet has become omnipresent for those in society who are “wired in.” For the “Digital Citizens” who use the Internet daily, the gains from political participation and economic advantages are more likely to be obtained. For the twenty-seven percent of Americans who do not use the Internet at all, there is less opportunity to find work with decent wages and growth as well as less chance that they will be politically involved. The divide that separates those who enjoy the advantages of being “wired in” and those who are not connected is more evident and growing. Further economic and societal stratification is compounded as policy makers, educators, and society as a whole fail to understand the importance of the Internet in impacting the lives of all citizens. This book is a useful bridge in building the understanding of the necessity for action in bringing technology skills to the educational system and the underserved communities who would benefit most. The authors of *Digital Citizenship* focus on the full implications of Internet use in terms of public policy, economic prospect, and political participation within all aspects and combinations of American society. The authors see this book as markedly different from their previous work, including *Virtual Inequality: Beyond the Digital Divide*, as well as from the general body of research on Internet use. The work examines if individuals, in the context of the concept of U.S. citizenship, have the ability to participate fully in society and to wholly engage in the privileges of citizenship.

To be a “digital citizen,” access to technology is not sufficient. The “digital divide” was defined as lack of access to technology in a US Department of Commerce study, *Falling*

through the Net II: New Data on the Digital Divide (1997). In the first chapter of this book, the authors go a step further and define digital citizens “as those who use the Internet regularly and effectively – that is, on a daily basis” (p.1). Without the skills to use information technology as well as daily access to the Internet, an individual can not bridge the digital divide and the gap has been growing ever wider. Those who are marginalized in society become more so due to lack of participation in the economics and politics of society around them. Citing the Pew Internet and American Life Project, the authors reveal that in 2006, less than half of Americans are digital citizens. A little more than a quarter of the U.S. population still do not go online at all, and are completely excluded from participation online. The authors take the position that even that with the exponential growth of Internet use, inequity and exclusion still exists.

The book draws on a great deal of significant research, in particular the Pew Internet and American Life Project and Pew Research Center studies and surveys. The research and findings support the authors’ contention that daily Internet use increases the likelihood that users are politically involved and benefit economically. The authors explore what it means to take part in an online society and describe participation by following “Roger Smith’s three traditions of citizenship in U.S. history: Lockean liberalism (equality of opportunity), civic republicanism (politics), and ascriptive hierarchy (inequality)” (p.2). These traditions are then related to the analysis of the research and findings through each chapter of the book. The findings are focused on the U.S. with few comparisons of use in other countries as the authors compare the relationship of U.S. citizenship ideals, equality in economic and civic opportunity, with digital citizenship.

The surveys analyzed are compiled of questions about economic status, geographical location, education level, work and type of work, earnings, if computers and the Internet are used as part of work, Internet use inside and outside the home, marital status, age, gender, ethnicity, political interest. “Digital experience” is surveyed in relation to frequency of use to determine how often people go on the Internet and their skill level in using the Internet. Surveys gathering information on the type of Internet access people have, broadband or dial-up, produced statistics that dial-up was a curtailing factor in people’s digital experience. These surveys also revealed that socioeconomic conditions and geographic locations affected service decisions. Ethnicity and race were presented as one of the major factors in the research. While Asian Americans were well represented in the data of many of the multivariate regression models presented in the appendix, this population was not as prevalent in the findings discussed in the book as was the African American, Latino, and Caucasian populations.

Chapter 2 and 3 discuss economic opportunity and civic engagement as benefits of a society online. Chapter 2 evaluates data that reflects widening income disparities and looks at how the Internet relates to income opportunities, especially for those who are less-educated. The authors expand on previous research by examining Pew national opinion data and U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey (CPS) to investigate the impact of technology use on wages. If workers find more economic opportunity as a direct result of technology use, then it would be in the interest of the public policy makers to increase the prospects of technology skill education. In addition to economic benefits, civic engagement may also be an added benefit from more frequent Internet use.

Examining political news and information dissemination, the authors infer that the Internet encourages people to be involved and interested in politics and political discussion. Chapter 3 explores the benefits of online news that result in political engagement while Chapter 4 reveals that engagement leads to political participation for digital citizens. The authors cite research that frequent Internet use increases political participation and voting. The notion of increased political participation through Internet use is scrutinized in great depth. The authors venture beyond the available research and explore the effects of e-mails, chat rooms, and online news as Internet use on political participation.

In the chapter titled, *From the Digital Divide to Digital Citizenship*, the authors' outline which demographic attributes are deciding factors in whether or not a person has Internet access and is a skillful user. Over 103,000 respondents to the 2003 CPS as well as recent Pew data provided the authors with evidence that location, age, income, education, race, and ethnicity are important factors, while gender was much less an important aspect in the degree or lack of digital citizenship. All of these variables in different combinations and using various controls resulted in enlightening outcomes. This chapter illustrated in detail the foundation of this book, that to be a "digital citizen," one must not only have access but frequent use and the skill with which to effectively use that access.

Chapter 5 expands on other observations such as despite growing use of the Internet; the digital divide affected by race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status is growing. Said factors will continue to influence the numbers and make-up of future digital citizens. The

authors' observation that "Asian Americans are no different than whites in the probability of being digital citizens," (p.113) perhaps gives explanation as to why this minority is not compared as often in the book as other minorities. Further explanation of this statement would have been helpful for a better understanding this observation. Least likely to engage in "digital citizenship" are poor minorities who live in areas where the schools are inadequate and thus are more likely to have lower education levels and be excluded from technology-intensive jobs. These circumstances produce the section of society that is most likely to be excluded from true digital citizenship. Educational inequities further prevent a portion of Americans from prospering.

Broadband and Digital Citizenship, Chapter 6, illustrates that broadband facilitates digital citizenship by making it easier to explore the Internet. Broadband users are likely to visit a great number of websites and possess more skill with the technology. Findings indicate that although broadband subscription is increasing, less than half of Americans have high-speed Internet access. What holds some Americans back from adopting broadband is whether or not it is available and can be afforded. Rural areas are less likely to have broadband access due to diminished profitability for the carriers. The authors note that these are citizens who could greatly benefit from distance education and online health care. Those with low incomes are negatively affected by the higher price of broadband access. The cycle continues.

The last chapter, Public Education and Universal Access: Beyond the Digital Divide puts into perspective the importance of technology and information in the schools, especially

those schools in the poorer neighborhoods. Chapter 7 relates the importance of technology skills to economic advancement in educational terms. Assuming that using technology at work is important to wage levels and salary increases, then the foundation of technology education should be an important component in the education of future citizens. Inequality in education creates a digital inequality which in turn reduces the possibilities for economic advancement for those who are already disadvantaged. Finding more advantageous job opportunities is not the only way young Americans can benefit from technology education in the schools. The authors contend that Internet use is linked to civic engagement and that the young are most likely to be affected. Younger Americans are more likely to turn to the Internet for news. Voter turn out is more affected by chat rooms and e-mail that are embraced by younger citizens, which increase the likelihood of voting in presidential elections. Other forms of political engagement such as working for a candidate or attending rallies are also facilitated by the Internet.

The groups in society that are on the wrong side of the gap can find a bridge across inequity to better economic status and a voice in democracy by participation as digital citizens. The authors believe that although education is a key factor in realizing digital citizenship, the educational system cannot be relied on in the current model as schools are largely dependant on tax revenues and the quality of resources is reflective of location. While there have been some federal programs that have worked to get technology in schools, as the authors have stressed, access is not the answer in itself. It is vital to incorporate information technology into the curriculum. Teachers as well as students need to understand how to effectively use technology and use it frequently.

The ideas in this book are well presented and supported. Hopefully, policy makers and educators will find this work useful in making change. The research presented justifies increasing technological access and education. It would be worth taking another look at universal access programs such as the city of San Francisco free citywide wifi proposal that ultimately failed in 2006. In another more successful scenario, small, rural Kutztown, Pennsylvania partnered with Apple Computer and Adobe Systems to explore providing each student in a K-12 with laptops, improved network infrastructure, teacher training, and other supportive structure. While this scenario may be more feasible in a rural setting as opposed to an urban one, the benefits described in the report affected whole families in ways that build digital citizenship. The debate as to how to overcome this issue in the library and information science field is ongoing. Public libraries struggle to provide computers and the infrastructure to a population that is much greater than the resources. The school libraries are understaffed or being eliminated altogether as administrators look for areas to cut during ever increasing budget crises. Academic librarians are amazed at the low level of information literacy that students possess but some say it is up to the professors to teach literacy. The answer to equality in digital citizenship for all Americans does not rely solely on libraries to provide access or teachers to provide the education or mayors to provide free wifi; it will take a fluid and concerted effort of all concerned. Advocacy and creative partnering in schools and libraries, along with the programs built by the policy makers can only improve the chances that all Americans will have equal opportunity for digital citizenship and in turn benefit from economic opportunity and civic involvement.