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Chapter VI

Electronic Communities: Assessing Equality of Access in a Rural Minnesota Community

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The impacts of new technologies often belie the hopes of proponents and the fears of detractors. For example, Claude Fischer (1992) in his thorough analysis of the diffusion and social effects of the telephone, suggests that the overall effect of this new technology in the early twentieth century was not a dramatic break from the existing social order. "In more general terms, Americans apparently used home telephones to widen and deepen existing social patterns rather than to alter them." (263) Moreover, he found initial access was determined by existing economic resources and social location (e.g. status). Our study examines a new communications technology which (at the very least) promises to be for the twenty-first century what the telephone was for the twentieth. The research question examined below follows a central concern of proponents and detractors of the Internet: whether this new technology will exacerbate or alleviate a growing inequality in resources (Phillips, 1990) among Americans, creating a new class of information "haves" and "have-nots" (Schiller, 1994). This question is answered in the context of a rural community consciously seeking to develop broad-based Internet resources available to all members. Existing socioeconomic inequalities are replicated with regards to computer ownership and use. With regards to knowledge and support for the network however, "social capital" constitutes an alternative path to socioeconomic resources. The community electronic network replicates not only economic stratification in the community but the social structure as well. These findings, as this article discusses, have broad implications for future studies of the Internet and other emerging communication technologies. Such findings suggest that emerging virtual social structures are grounded in existing economic and social structures.

Equality is a fundamental value of American democracy. Americans consistently endorse equality of opportunity to exercise liberty rather than the equality of outcomes resulting from the exercise of liberty (McClosky & Zaller, 1984). What conditions are necessary to fully guarantee this equality of opportunity has been a central debate in modern politics. Marshall (1950) has argued that equal citizenship in modern industrial democracies requires recognition of social rights or rights to economic resources. The idea that equal citizenship without social rights is simply formal equality with practical inequality was one of several forces promoting the expansion of the modern welfare state in American politics (Sandel, 1996).

The argument that a minimal standard of resources should be guaranteed by the government to assure equal citizenship has been extended to information technology (Williams, 1963; Murdock & Golding, 1989). There is a fear that inequalities in access to information technologies will create a new class of information "haves" and "have-nots". Currently, inequalities exist in both access to and usage of computers and the Internet (Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press, 1994). Anderson, Bidson, Law, and Bridger (1995), using Bureau of Labor statistics, document inequalities in access to computers and network services by income, education, race/ethnicity, age, sex, and urbanicity. While computer accessibility gaps for sex and geographic location have decreased in the early 1990s, inequalities still exist. There was no narrowing in gaps in accessibility to network services, however, and existing gaps in access to both computers and network services based on income and education actually widened. In any case, access does not necessarily translate into comfort or skill in using electronic media. Girls and women, even with equal access to computers, report less interest and confidence in their computer usage than boys or men (Krendl, Broihier, & Fleetwood, 1989).

This point precedes and supports an argument that reliance on market forces alone will not result in an equality of information opportunity and that government should intervene to assure equal access (Pavlik & Thalhimer, 1994; King & Kraemer, 1995; Calabrese & Borchert, 1996). Market forces cannot be expected to provide universal access, especially considering existing socioeconomic inequalities.

Equality of opportunity may be viewed in terms of general opportunity to participate in the life of a society, most notably in the free market, but also more specifically as equality of opportunity to participate in the political process. The finding that political participation is heavily dependent on wealth and education, resulting in unequal influence on government among citizens, is a consistent one (Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). The same inequalities that predict political participation are also evident in access to computers and network services. Verba and his colleagues make the argument that high socioeconomic status leads to high political participation not only because of greater financial resources, but also because education and certain types of employment provide the civic skills and information that enable participation. They argue as well that membership in civic associations can be a source of civic skills and information, thereby moderating the trends that link socioeconomic status with political participation.

This suggests that simply providing equal access to information technologies may not result in equal citizenship in this regard. To fully realize equality, access to information technologies may need to be viewed in other ways than just physical access. This would include knowledge of opportunities, skills, interest in using information technologies, and removing attitudinal barriers to access. Education in computer use is one way to provide