

Information Empowerment and Democracy in the 21st Century

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This forum is more important than most people think. We are discussing the infrastructure of the future, the basis on which our social lives will be organized. A major aspect of the crisis we face is whether most major public policy decisions about the new technology will be made before the actual public can get involved, especially the impoverished and economically insecure majority. So let me begin by expressing appreciation to the Chicago Public Library and the Coalition for Information Access for co-sponsoring this discussion.

I work in a bookstore-publishing organization that is located at 607 E. Muddy Waters Drive; formerly known as 43rd St. This is a neighborhood rich in cultural history. Our store is in the last location used by Theresa Needham for her world famous blues club called Theresa's for nearly 50 years, and we're just a block or so from the Checkerboard Blues Club, still a vibrant authentic paragon of blues culture. On the other hand this area of Grand Blvd. is one of the poorest areas in Chicago, with rates among the highest in the city for unemployment, low income, homelessness, TB, AIDS, and every other statistic of social crisis. We've got Martin Luther King High School, with its basketball team ranked #1 in the USA (until last week!), but with an overall attendance and academic record on the other end of the spectrum. I come here to discuss the information revolution from this context.

The people in my neighborhood came to Chicago to work in the factories and the stockyards. The jobs were good and provided an immediate upgrade in the quality of life one had in Mississippi or Arkansas. They were forced to come because the invention of the mechanical cotton picker abruptly ended any need for unskilled field labor.

Now these people are being kicked out of the factories, this time by the computer and robotic technology. We are in the midst of a revolution that is transforming the entire world. A revolution in technology is rapidly spreading to every industry, from shipping docks to steel mills to fast food dispensaries creating production and service without human labor. The future is fast being defined as a worker-less society.

We are faced with a crisis, but it is useful to remember that in the Chinese written language, the character for crisis is represented by two characters, one meaning danger and the other opportunity. The danger is that this new technology is rapidly increasing productivity while conversely decreasing the need for human labor. On this basis the society is polarizing along economic lines, with a rapid increase in billionaires (since the Reagan and Bush years there are now over one million millionaires in the USA), and with the richest 1% with as much wealth as the bottom 90%.

On the other hand there are 75 million people in the USA in poverty, over 7 million homeless, and 20% of those who work 40 hours a week have incomes below the poverty line. At some point we have to make a healthy and happy population the first and main priority before we invest our resources into high tech tools that presuppose such social conditions, but our society continues to head in the opposite direction toward what must be called barbaric.

On the other hand, these conditions are so dangerous that we sometimes forget the great opportunities based on this same technology. After all, the social upper class hardly works, at least not as beasts of burden. There are great possibilities to occupy our time based on the nurturing of human life, from prenatal care to child rearing to lifelong learning to serving the elderly. There is the full potential of human civilization and culture, both developing the skills to produce it better and on higher levels, and cultivating the tastes to explore the diversity of global cultural consumption. Everyone should have the necessary economic security required for the freedom to become truly human, to improve the quality of their lives based on this new technology. In sum, this forum is about facing up to the dangers of this new world we're entering, and taking a stand for democracy and human liberation.

The key is the so-called information highway, by which computer technology moves to center stage as the essential tool for producing and cultivating human consciousness. This has already replaced the printing technology that started with Gutenberg in the 15th century. Further, it will transform the telephone and television, as we know them. The most general starting point is the fight for universal access to the information superhighway. There are at least five aspects of access: 1. access to hardware: there are few computers in poor communities; 2. access to software; 3. access to training; 4. access or entry points to the highway; and 5. access to the financial resources to not only get on but to stay on the highway. These are critical issues, but they are not my main points of emphasis.

Many enlightened forces that understand the relationship between information and democracy are leading the overall discussion of access. In fact, everybody agrees with access they just mean different things by it. What we need, and what is more inclusive, is "information empowerment."

For example, people have access to voting, but half of the US electorate doesn't because they have been functionally disenfranchised. (yesterday in Illinois, 7 in 10 registered voters did not vote, and only 45% of those eligible had registered, so democracy was carried out by only 16% of the potential vote!) The electoral democracy we have in the US is dominated by great wealth, so it is rare to have a people's candidate like Harold Washington break through, and as you remember the promise of empowerment in that 1983 Chicago mayoral race led to unprecedented levels of voter registration and voter turnout. We need to think in terms of empowerment because as with Harold Washington it means change, it transformation, it means a step toward freedom in fact, and not just in possibility.

Information empowerment begins with access, but goes further in the following ways: 1. empowerment means that there are data bases designed to answer the questions being raised by people in poverty and people fighting forms of exploitation and oppression; 2. empowerment means that we have enough grass roots people online engaging in conferences for the sharing of experiences and forging the levels of consensus necessary for informed united civic action; 3.

empowerment means grass roots groups utilizing the technology to engage in publishing newsletters at the grass roots level with the required technical skill to take advantage of the data bases and graphics available on the highway; 4. empowerment means that education is transformed based on a new formula: every student has a computer, every school has computer labs, every class room is smart, and every teacher gets summer and weekend workshops to keep up (we need to go way past the innovations that followed the Soviet Sputnik crisis of 1957); 5. empowerment means a new kind of library system by which the library is a technical service institution guiding people to information, training them, sending organizers out to transform the community into an electronically smart space of human habitation, and, as it has been, a repository of hard copy.

Overall, information empowerment is not a technical matter, but a matter of politics, of morality, of action. Not only do we have to make this superhighway free, we have to change the society in which it operates so it's possible to have information empowerment.

However, the likelihood is that we're going to get an information railroad and not an information highway. The railroad was the major 19th century transportation breakthrough of industrialization in the USA. It was made possible by the federal ~government giving millions of acres of public land free to private corporations to build railroads (from 1862-72 Congress gave away 100 million acres!), and then allowed them to charge the public fees to ride or ship freight. At a latter stage, based on automobile technology, the government built and continues to maintain the highways we are all free to enter. If the information revolution is a highway we should all be able to get on free, but since we are being expected to pay a fee its a railroad and not a highway.

Let's make this forum a beginning in our fight for a truly free and universal information highway. And more, we need to fight for free and just society. Our options are still open, so we must act now. Toward this end, we need to have forums like this in all of our local communities as soon as possible.