
Book Reviews

Rating Criteria

Theoretical Approach / Methodology

Has the book a theoretical approach? Is the applied methodology useful for the author's objectives? Is the context of the information clear? Is the publication positioned within existing literature? Are the terms clearly defined? Is the information consistent?

Structure

How does the chosen structure help to understand the information?

Depth of the Analysis

Is the content sufficient to explain the described phenomenon ?

Contribution to New Knowledge

How does it contribute to existing knowledge? Does it use up-to-date data?

Applicability

Is the content useful? Does it help in solving practical problems?

Clarity and Style of Writing

Are the ideas presented in a clear and comprehensible way? Are specific and illustrative examples given? Is the information concise?

Access Denied in the Information Age

edited by S. Lax



reviewed by Dennis Anderson, Pace University, New York, USA

The Information Age is really nothing to e-mail home about. That, at any rate, is the conclusion of a series of papers collected in "Access Denied in the Information Age." British academic Stephen Lax and the book's other contributors find few – if any – signs that the proliferation of new information and communications technologies over the past decade has sparked a revolutionary change in the world's political or economic power structures. Advances in computing and telecommunications have not fundamentally "turned upside down" the established social order and created a more equitable world, as some of the more ardent proponents of these new technologies predicted.

In fact, Mr. Lax and his fellow authors reach the rather unsurprising conclusion that technology's power is, in fact, limited by the political, social and economic systems in which its users operate. Mr. Lax, who edited the volume, writes with apparent disapproval in the introduction that: "These technologies are, after all, being deployed and used in the context of a capitalist system, which has now more-or-less completed its globalization project."

"Access Denied" provides a healthy reality check about some of the important limits to what we can expect from ICTs, as the author refer to information and communications technologies. But the book's focus on the impact of ICTs in developed countries is a significant flaw. By doing so, "Access Denied" fails to consider the greatest challenges to the widespread adoption of ICTs as well as the tremendous potential they do have to be used as instruments of political, social and economic change.

Of course, the culture of the offline world is going to significantly influence the shape and effect of the online world. And the mere provision of access to technology and information is not a panacea. As Mr. Lax notes, many commentators on the "Information Society" share the view that "information is the base upon which future society will develop." Information, these people argue, is the ultimate source of power in this new society. But information is simply a tool. It is useless in the hands of those without the skill and knowledge to use it.

For those who can make use of it, however, information is powerful, indeed. It is an essential, if insufficient, ingredient if advances in ICTs are going to drive social change. Access to ICTs is therefore a key issue. As Dutton et al. correctly state in "Access Denied": "The social dynamic of the revolution in ICT is not about information, but about access."

Unfortunately, the book's authors do not address this issue from a global perspective. The book, in its section on access, does offer some insight into the digital divide with respect to gender, class and ethnicity. But there is much more to consider.

When Kofi Annan, the Secretary General of the United Nations, talked about the digital divide, he was talking not only about the global divide between technology haves and have-nots. He was talking about the basic capacity of countries to participate in and benefit from the revolution in information technologies. Nations without adequate safe drinking water and sanita-

tion are not going to have the money necessary to make the enormous investments required to build an information and telecommunications infrastructure.

Aside from cost, language is another important limiting factor. The vast majority of content on the Internet is in English. People who can't read it are obviously unable to benefit from that knowledge.

Still, modern communications technologies may be much more powerful than "Access Denied" implies. Dutton et al. contribute a chapter on the failure of a pager network in the United States in 1998. While perhaps interesting in a limited social science context, the authors' conclusion that a bunch of American white-collar workers got along just fine without their pagers hardly seems surprising. Nor does it support the idea that, therefore, paging technology is inconsequential. Had the authors looked instead at adherents of the Falun Gong movement in China and their use of pagers, the conclusion would likely have been far different. Members of Falun Gong have used pagers and cell phones to communicate surreptitiously and coordinate enormous mass protests, on a scale not seen in decades of communist rule in China.

Trade Unions and Access to the Internet is interesting to study which raises the question of the future of unions in the information age. Authors Holly and Herman suggest that "trade unions should negotiate for access to and appropriate use of corporate email systems as a right -with privacy and confidentiality maintained." They also argue that they should bargain for help in gaining the skills to use information technology.

The book's second section consists of articles under the heading "knowledge." In *The Postmodern University? The Loss of Purpose in British Universi-*

ties, Webster examines changes in higher education wrought in part by the new technologies. He finds that institutions and students often seem to view information as a commodity to be acquired solely for the purpose of using it for economic gain. Online distance education does seem to lend itself more easily to the teaching of specific skills than to the open-ended, analytical and critical learning that is the hallmark of a liberal arts education. But that certainly does not mean that two cannot coexist, even within the same institution.

University teaching methods may also be limiting access to knowledge of computer science. Trayhurn in *Brickies or Bricoleurs? Gender in Computing and Design Courses*, finds that a significant gender divide exists in computing and technology courses. She further notes "the computing science discipline appears to be unconcerned at the absence of women within the subject."

The book's final section asks the core question: Does information communication technology empower those who are powerless. The authors are not optimistic. One chapter focuses on the potential for untrammelled capitalism to concentrate power in the information market into the hands of a few. Another focuses on the continued inequality in access to the Internet even in the United States.

Certainly the Internet, cell phones and pagers, are not going to transform the world by themselves. But there are numerous ways that people empower themselves – personally, economically and politically – with knowledge gained online. Individuals can get health information unmediated by a physician or insurance company. They can meet like-minded people around the world. Buyers – both individual and corporate – can now get a wealth of pricing information online, changing the balance of power in markets for everything from plastics to books. People around the

world learn about democracy – and all other political systems – by reading online. The potential of ICTs to transform the political and social order is, ironically, the best in those parts of the world where the government is least likely to want to give its citizens unimpeded access. But people are resourceful. Huge numbers of activists in China are using the Web to explore heretofore forbidden ideas, despite government efforts to stop them.

Globalization will bring more prosperity around the world and make it possible for more nations to participate in the ICT revolution. Given the importance of the tools of the information age, ensuring equitable access to them deserves careful attention. ICT can work both ways: to perpetuate the social order or to change it. What happens depends on us.

Rating

Rating Criteria	Rating
Theoretical Approach / Methodology	+++
Structure	+++
Depth of the Analysis	+++
Contribution of new Knowledge	+++
Applicability	+++
Clarity and Style of Writing	+++
Rating Points:	excellent: ++++++ poor: +

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