

Problem

Closing the digital divide depends more on training and content than computers.

BY DARA MAYERS

Almost everything about the digital divide—whether it is growing or shrinking or exists at all—is subject to heated debate. Probably for this reason Lisa Servon spends the first chapter of her book, *Bridging the Digital Divide: Community, Technology and Policy* (Blackwell, 2002), defining what the digital divide is and debunking some widely held beliefs about it. “The biggest misconception of the digital divide is that it is a problem only of access—that if you give people computers then the problem is taken care of,” Servon says.

Servon believes that the commonly held definition of the divide as a literal gap in access to information technologies between rich and poor, educated and uneducated, people of color and whites, actually contributes to the divide itself, because policy makers apply misguided solutions to a misunderstood problem.

Indeed, dropping technology costs and expanded access to the Internet for millions of Americans have led many to believe that the divide is soon to be a thing of the past in the United States. Last February, Nancy Victory, head of the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, part of the U.S. Department of Commerce, reported that the divide was disappearing. The study, *A Nation Online: How Americans Are Expanding Their Use of The Internet*, shows that from 1998 to 2001 Internet use among African-Americans grew at an annual rate of 31 percent, while use among whites grew by 19 percent. Soon after the release of the study, the N.T.I.A. announced plans to kill the Technology Opportunities Program, which was designed to provide matching grant money for technology projects at schools, libraries, health agencies, police departments and nonprofits.

This kind of thinking makes people like Servon nervous. “Because the technology gap has been defined so narrowly, policies and programs have also been narrowly focused,” she writes. Servon believes that two major, and usually overlooked, components of the divide are training in IT literacy and the creation of content relevant to underserved communities—and that these issues are actually much more difficult to resolve than the more direct problem of access. “Policy makers’ narrow focus on access is insufficient to the problem. There is a disconnect between policy and need,” she writes.

According to Servon, “A troubling cycle has begun to take shape, in which the lack of access to information technology and its requisite skills contributes both to an inability to compete in the main-

stream economy and an inability to participate in civil society.” These inequities, she fears, will only increase as broadband, which enables users to access a higher volume of information, becomes more widespread among those with high incomes.

Technology, however, can be used to promote positive social change, to expand democracy and to alleviate poverty. In one chapter of her book Servon, with Marla K. Nelson, offers an instructive history of community technology centers (C.T.C.s) and the community technology movement, showing their development from the 1960’s to the present. C.T.C.s aim to provide computer access to the general public and to underserved populations, especially low-income people. She also discusses some of the successful approaches now being practiced.

Servon believes that in addition to promoting computer literacy, community technology centers could become a potent force for economic advancement in poor neighborhoods as they bring residents together to set goals and achieve results.

“One of the things that is really useful and important about the community technology movement is that it has bubbled up from the grassroots level,” Servon says. “What you see are a thousand different programs reflecting a thousand different communities in unique ways.”

In another chapter Servon explores the unique approach that the City of Seattle has taken toward bridging its digital divide. David Keyes, the city’s community technology planner since the position was created in 1996, says that based on information gathered from local C.T.C.s, a lot of them share many of the same problems. “Very few C.T.C.s have endowments or other revenue to support the services they are or could be offering,” Keyes says. “It is often easier to get funding for equipment than for people to run training programs.”

Other problems the centers reported in Seattle were that it was difficult for them to develop organizational capacities as well as technology, business and marketing plans because they simply don’t have enough staff to carry out such projects. As a result of these findings, the City of Seattle changed its approach from supplying hardware to supplying funding for staff and for educational materials.

Servon would like to see that kind of responsiveness to local needs introduced on a national level. The issue, she believes, engages basic principles of poverty policy. “Most urban poverty policy is oriented toward helping people survive from day-to-day,” she writes, through, for example, food stamps, welfare and hous-

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Teenagers improve their computer skills at Plugged In, a community technology center in East Palo Alto, Calif.

Computers in the Community

Ford Foundation support for Lisa Servon's book, *Bridging the Digital Divide: Community, Technology and Policy*, reflects the Community and Resource Development unit's interest in exploring the role that community technology centers can play not just in improving job prospects for youth and other residents of poor neighborhoods but in building communal assets such as safe streets, public space and public markets. A recent grant to the Project for Public Space is assisting Dr. Servon and Dr. Randall Pinkett to explore the potential for C.T.C.s to serve as active public places to address challenges and opportunities associated with equitable development in distressed urban communities.

The foundation's Media, Arts and Culture unit has funded several national and international reports that outline the complex nature of the digital divide as well as efforts that are making a difference in local communities and at the national level. These include a report by the Consumers Federation of America (www.consumerfed.org) and the Consumers Union (www.consumersunion.org). A recent grant—made in collaboration with the foundation's Governance and Civil Society unit—addresses how the digital divide relates to macroeconomic trends, structural inequality and democratic development. The grantee, Economists Allied for Arms Reduction, will establish a global network of economists and information technology experts.

For information on community technology work supported by the foundation's offices in East Africa and Southern Africa visit the Web site of the Project for Information Access and Connectivity at www.piac.org.

ing vouchers. "I would argue that there is a second tier of resources that people need. Things like economic literacy and access to information technology are needed in order to leave poverty—not just to survive. If we really want to solve the urban poverty problem we have to provide the second order of resources as well—and not see them as superfluous or peripheral."

Servon believes that lack of access to technology impedes democracy. "The skills necessary to work, prosper and participate in current society are intrinsically bound up with the ability to use information technology tools," she writes.

That view gets plenty of validation in conversations with people on the C.T.C. movement's front lines. "A widening gap between the information rich and the information poor puts our democratic institutions at risk," says Larry Irving, former head of the Technology Opportunities Program and former assistant secretary of commerce in the Clinton Administration. "The currency of the information age is information. If you don't have access to information, how do you participate in a democracy as a full citizen?"

The implications for civil rights are real. "In a democracy, in order to be a sovereign people, every citizen deserves an equal opportunity to participate in the important discourses of the time," says Dr. Jorge Reina Schement, codirector of the Institute

for Information Policy at Penn State University. In order to participate you need access to communication. In 1798 that meant being able to send a letter from Philadelphia to New York on the post road, and that post road is mandated in the constitution," he says. "Already in 1789 Americans were concerned with access—because without access you don't have a democracy."

That's why the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights has spearheaded an initiative called the Digital Empowerment Campaign to restore and expand funding for community technology efforts. Specifically, the campaign aims to restore funding for the Community Technology Center initiative, which was under the Department of Education, and the Technologies Opportunity Program, which was under the Department of Commerce. Both have been eliminated in the federal budget for 2003.

The campaign has bipartisan support in Congress. In their study, *Bringing a Nation Online*, the Leadership Conference and the Benton Foundation found that "many Americans have yet to witness the significant social, civic, educational, and economic benefits of the information age." Decisions on the funding will be made this fall.

Meanwhile, the centers continue their work as best they can. Rahsaan Harris is director of Playing2win, a community technology center that was established in 1983 in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. "Our mission is to provide our members with new educational, social and economic opportunities using effective education programs and cutting edge technology," he says. With an annual budget just under \$500,000, the center survives on membership fees (\$45 per year for a family) and donations from family foundations and individuals.

The oldest stand-alone C.T.C. in the United States, Playing2win offers open-access hours as well as an extensive variety of introductory classes for those who have never used computers. It also offers advanced courses in Flash, HTML, PhotoShop and Web site design. (Many of the courses are offered in both English and Spanish.) And the center gives community residents the opportunity to take e-business workshops and join an investment club. In one workshop teenagers are producing a Web magazine about their community called Harlem Live.

"Technology is a huge part of it. But it is more about educating people—helping them get new jobs, meeting the need for advanced education," says Harris. He adds that "A lot of people of color in inner-city communities are alienated from technology because they think that only rich people and white people can make use of it. It's like 'I am not Bill Gates—why do I need to be on the Internet?' One solution is education. It's turning technology into a community effort, showing the humanity and the people that are behind technology. The need for people to have voice, to find jobs, to learn to read—these are problems that technology can help solve. Using the Internet can help ameliorate resource gaps, giving access to great libraries and to all sorts of on-line resources that simply are not available in low-income communities."

Trish Malinas Dziko, cofounder and executive director of the Technology Access Foundation in Seattle, agrees with Servon that content is a major missing link in bridging the divide. Not only is there not enough content of interest to low-income people and to people of color, but they are shut out of the process of producing content. "If you are a person of color the