

## **A Call to Arms: What in the World is Happening to Information?**

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*This paper is, in essence, a call to arms. We are fighting a battle, and that battle is all about the provision of and access to information. This paper looks briefly at how the provision of information has created gaps between those who have access, and those who do not. The author defines the terms 'information rich' and 'information poor' which are used interchangeably with 'haves' and 'have-nots' throughout the literature. The author has also used them interchangeably because they have the same meaning. The author considers the issue of access and discusses the barriers to access to information throughout the world. Some barriers are obvious – including culture, socio-economic standing, cost of information, education and so on. The author is of the opinion that one of the greatest dangers to society (on a global scale) lies in the concentration of ownership of companies who control the information and the media in which they are presented, coupled with the commercialisation of information. That is, information is being increasingly treated as a commercial commodity, and the companies who own that information are becoming fewer and fewer through billion-dollar mergers. This gives rise to opportunity for commercial exploitation, and for bias as to what information is stored and disseminated. The author believes that librarians have a social responsibility to voice their concern to the politicians of the world, and also to influence the development of information policies within nations. If this is not done, even if the gap between the information rich and the information poor were to narrow, there is the potential for access to only biased information. Only if national information policies are moulded with a basis of equal access for all will the future be brighter, otherwise the gap stands to widen even further. The author concludes that much can be done by librarians, on individual, national and international levels, and illustrates some existing initiatives, and suggestions for initiatives at an individual level.*

## **Introduction**

We live in a world of inequities. There have always been those who are better off, and those who are worse off. Since printing was invented by Gutenberg in the mid-15th Century, the way to acquire knowledge was largely through books. That is, the medium which contained the information was printed. Anyone who could read, could read that information, as long as they knew where to find it, and as long as they had access to it.

But man is a creature given to inventions. His methods of communication and storage of information were not destined to be limited to the face-to-face spoken word and the printed word. The first radio signal was sent in 1901, and the first television transmission in 1927. The earliest computers had their origins in the 1940s. Originally, they took up entire rooms, and were the marvel of a generation<sup>1</sup>. Over time, advances redefined what computers could do, and how much information they could contain. What was seemingly unthinkable in the 1940s now sits on the desktop of millions of employees worldwide, and in many homes throughout the world. Further still, a device which began as a project which had its beginnings in 1958 in the United States Defense Force as a response to the technological challenges imposed by Sputnik (Hafner, Katie and Lyon, Matthew, 1996, p32), now features in the lives of people worldwide. I am speaking of course of the Internet.

Although the cost of computers was originally astronomical, severely limiting and defining who used them, dramatic advancements in technology coupled with resultant reductions in price have occurred, and now many homes in Australia, indeed throughout the world, have them. Internet usage increases at an alarming rate. All of this sounds wonderful: in terms of science and the dissemination of information to the masses, it is. Or is it? Is it only some sectors of the masses who have access to that information and who have the necessary skills to retrieve it? Are not those sectors significantly advantaged over others?

The underlying problem with access to information for the latter part of the 20th Century was that it was increasingly electronic. In the beginning of the 21st Century, that is still the case, and this will only continue. The way in which information is produced, disseminated and retrieved has become increasingly via an electronic format. Information in printed format still abounds – books, journals, newspapers – but anyone looking to do even basic research into any topic will need computer retrieval skills, usually sooner rather than later. The average person needs the equipment to access the information and also needs the know-how. This is where it becomes apparent that: (a) not everyone has the equipment to obtain access; and (b) not everyone knows how to access it.

## **The Great Divide**

This is the gap between the ‘information rich’ and the ‘information poor’: one group has access and the ability to access, and one does not. The literature covering this topic abounds, and the phrase has been bandied about by politicians ad infinitum. The terms ‘knowledge nation’ and ‘digital divide’ have suffered from overkill. Who are the information rich, and who are the information poor? Although one may think immediately of Indian beggars as being information poor (and they are – third world countries have their own classification in this group), there are sectors of Western society who are information poor as well. The literature would generally concur that there are two groups of information poor: those in poor countries, and the poor within developed countries.

Alfred Kagan, editor of a composite policy paper published by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) (Kagan, Alfred, 2000, p 28) calls the rich versus poor countries the North versus the South, and claims that, to a greater or lesser extent, all countries have an information gap. He claims that two of the most striking examples of this are found within the United

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<sup>1</sup> According to *Time* magazine, the first all-true electronic computer was the ENIAC, unveiled in 1946, in a blaze of publicity. It weighed 30 tons - as big as two semi-trailers, had 19,000 vacuum tubes and 6,000 switches, enough to require an army of attendants. It was capable of adding 5,000 numbers in a second, a then unheard of feat. (Source: *Time* magazine, accessed online 30 April 2001) Interestingly, since conducting my original research into this subject, this information has become ‘premium content’ – a euphemistic way of saying that you’ll have to pay to access this now.

States and South Africa, which have an extremely skewed distribution of wealth, resulting in excellent information services for some, and poor or non-existent services for others. He quotes as an example a US study which showed that 73% of white students had their own computers as opposed to 32% of black students (Kagan, Alfred, 2000, p 30).

Kagan states that IFLA's Dennis Ocholla classifies the information poor according to five groups: the economically disadvantaged populations of the developing countries; rural people who are often geographically isolated by lack of communication and transportation systems; those disadvantaged by cultural and social poverty (especially the illiterate, the elderly, women and children); minorities who are discriminated against by race, creed and religion; and the physically disabled (Kagan, Alfred, 2000, p 28).

### **The Barriers**

It would appear that the barriers to access are largely economic, political, social and technological. According to Jonathan Dreadon, the barriers which need to be overcome include: cost, commercialisation of information, the type of data stored, culture, format, and education (Dreadon, Jonathan, 1997, p 181). I will discuss each of these barriers.

Cost is an obvious barrier. If the obtaining of information incurs a charge, it is discriminatory against those who cannot pay. Herein lies a paradox amongst public libraries worldwide: either they must charge for some services, which discriminates, or else they must not offer the service at all, which also discriminates.

Because of the increased commercialisation of information, Dreadon claims that it has begun to blur the distinction between public and private goods. If information is increasingly seen as an economic commodity, greedy multinationals stand to profit, while the information poor go without.

If left to market forces, profit will also dictate what data is collected and stored, and if this varies between countries, there is an obvious barrier. An example which supports this is found in the book publishing industry. William Wresch asserts that Africa produces less than 2% of the world's book titles and Latin America just 5%, while the industry tends to be dominated by the United States and Europe. He quotes the example of figures obtained from Jane Katjavivi, president of New Namibia Books, whose best-selling book hit 2,000 in the same year that the US market sold 2 billion books. Her biggest best seller sold just one-millionth of the US market (Wresch, William, 1996, pp 40-41).

Even in the public information arena, there is not a level playing field. Wresch asserts that even though there is much talk of an information explosion, major sources of public information have an inordinate American influence, and many foreign (ie. non-American) countries have little information about themselves. In fact, he claims that the range of public information available is very little compared to the range of cultures, histories, ideas, and peoples that populate our planet. Rather than an explosion, he claims there appears to be an implosion in which few voices are heard and little of the world seen (Wresch, William, 1996, p 41).

Culture can be an enormous barrier to equality of access. Amazingly, the *Star Tribune* reported that in 1996, more than half the people on the planet had yet to make their first telephone call. In 1990, India had only about 5 million telephones for its population of about 850 million people, which is less than 1% (*Star Tribune*, 1996). John Pateman asserts that there is probably more information, and disinformation, about Cuba which is put on the Internet and accessed by non-Cubans and anti-Cubans, than there is by the Cubans themselves. He asserts that this applies to other parts of the majority world, whose countries are talked about on the Internet but who cannot themselves get in to put their own viewpoint across. (Pateman, John, 1997, p 117).

The format in which information is stored and presented can and will produce problems. With a decreased emphasis on printed material, there is a great danger. A book will always be a book, and is

always there for the taking (as long as the library holds a copy). However, technological advances are so rapid that what is state-of-the-art today may well be defunct in five years time. When that occurs, there is the problem of how to access it, and how to reproduce it. If the equipment to access a particular format is no longer manufactured, this presents a huge problem, so provision must be made for this. Philips have recently ceased production of VHS video recorders. It wasn't that long ago that we were humming along to the song *Video killed the radio star*. Is another murder about to occur? *DVD killed the video star?*

Finally, there is the issue of education. Dreadon states that providing 'access' means making information accessible, available and meaningful. (Dreadon, Jonathan, 1997, p 181). It is not enough to merely provide the means, without showing people how to use it. Imagine placing your average 65-year-old in front of a computer and saying 'here's the Internet, now you're on your own'. Many clearly wouldn't have a clue how to use it, so merely providing the means of access is not enough. They need to know how to use it.

### **What's happening in the background**

To compound the obvious problems, something more insidious is happening in the background, and is tipped to continue happening. The irony of it is that those who are most likely to be affected are probably too busy watching Foxtel to notice. Mergers in the last decade of the 20th Century increasingly placed ownership of telecommunications and media companies in the hands of fewer people. Peter Young reports of a record number of billion dollar mergers, with telecommunications and the motion picture industry being dominant themes (Young, Peter, 1994, p 103).

An article in *The Australian* (Romei, S and Gilchrist, M, 2001, p M12) reports that there is a drive by big media companies to be 'all things to all people'. They want to own as much of the market share as they possibly can of Internet companies, television networks, cable television networks, book publishing empires, mobile phone networks, radio broadcasting networks, and the music industry. This example is in an American context but bear with me, it illustrates a point. Romei and Gilchrist tell us that, despite running the world's biggest media company, AOL Time Warner bosses still have room in their subconscious minds for you – yes, you. This is their dream:

You get home from work, promise the kids the latest Harry Potter doll to get them off the cartoon Network and on to America Online to do their homework, switch on CNN for the stock market wrap, check share prices and sports scores on AOL via your mobile phone, flick through Time magazine, prepare dinner from a recipe in Linda McCartney's vegetarian cookbook, watch *The Matrix* on cable, buy tickets to *Matrix II* from AOL Moviefone, listen to a Madonna CD while emailing your parents, retire with a Scott Turow thriller. You have had a diverse and stimulating evening, without once leaving the pulsating teat of AOL Time Warner.

The merger of AOL with Time Warner in January 2000 was announced 10 years after the biggest media marriage ever, between Time Inc and Warner Bros, and was worth US\$160 billion when it was unveiled. Romei and Gilchrist quote US media critic Professor Robert McChesney's<sup>2</sup> view of US media ownership as consisting of three tiers. First is a tier of eight or nine huge companies, second is a tier of about two dozen, and after that 'you are in the total bush leagues'. His belief is that the concentration of media power in so few hands threatens no less an ideal than American democracy.

At the time of writing, Philadelphia-based cable network giant Comcast is playing ardent suitor to a seemingly reluctant Disney by proposing a reported US\$66 billion dollar takeover. But there's nothing Mickey Mouse about this proposal.

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<sup>2</sup> Professor Robert McChesney is the author of books such as *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*.

Comcast's website claims they already bring entertainment television to 74 million homes. Apparently this is not enough. Their promotional slogan under the 'Comcast Cable' banner states 'it's all about total viewing control'<sup>3</sup>. Indeed. But who has the total control we might ask.

It's not only the ideal of an American democracy which is under threat. McChesney states that the combination of the deregulation of media ownership coupled with the privatisation of television in lucrative European and Asian markets, further combined with new communications technologies, have made it possible for media giants to establish powerful distribution and production networks within and among nations. He claims that the global media market has become dominated by the same eight transnational corporations (TNCs) that rule US media. (McChesney, Robert, 1999, p11). The eight TNCs are General Electric, AT&T/Liberty Media, Disney, Time Warner (now AOL Time Warner), Sony, News Corporation, Viacom and Seagram<sup>4</sup>.

The sad reality is that the US media market is actually one of the most competitive in the world. In most countries, media ownership is in the hands of even fewer companies. The real danger is that, even if certain sectors finally do gain access to information, that information can be the product of great bias. When it is controlled by only a few, they have their own political interests and their own agenda, and there is an inherent danger in this. If this sounds too dramatic, consider the reaction of the states of New York and New Jersey on the evening of 30 October 1938, when Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds* was broadcast on CBS Radio. Welles' broadcast unintentionally and inadvertently sent thousands of people into a state of panic because people believed that aliens from Mars really *had* landed.

### **Politically speaking**

We already have a reality where much is controlled by few. Refinement of national information policies is occurring throughout the countries who are the major information producers of the world (particularly the USA and Europe). If these policies change for the worse, they may allow even more power to the few TNCs. There could even be a scenario where even the information rich become information poor. By this, I mean that they will only see filtered biased information because those in control only want them to see that. Does this sound paranoid? Maybe. Could it happen? Yes, it certainly could.

Peter Young reports that in the United States, the corporate strategies to assemble media empires will have a fundamental influence on federal policies in that country, which then flows on to libraries and their services, and society in general (Young, Peter, 1994, p 103). Young asserts that their (the USA's) National Information Policy needs to be a balance of public good versus commercial gain, but he admits that there are no simple solutions. He concludes that some form of national policy leadership is required to ensure a continued balance between the social interests of the community and economic progress in the information age, and that librarians have a role to play (Young, Peter, 1994, p 113).

During the Clinton Administration, the National Information Infrastructure (NII) was a fervently discussed subject. One of the components of the NII was the Government Information Locator Service (GILS). Using the Internet, a user could search the GILS server for the location and content of information holdings of the federal government. It was introduced because the US government regarded the documents as public goods which should not be recharged (they cost billions of dollars of public money to produce). The premise was that it should be made as easy as possible for citizens, communities and companies to exploit them. There was a lack of information about the existence and content of the resources, so GILS was created out of necessity (Kangas, S et al, 1995, p 124).

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<sup>3</sup> Comcast's website is <http://www.comcast.com/>

<sup>4</sup> An excellent resource detailing US media ownership is the Columbia Journalism Review website "Who Owns What": <http://www.cjr.org/tools/owners/>

However, in a post-September 11 world, such open information policies have been called into question. The threat of being too 'open' and hence too vulnerable to terrorist attacks has, according to Shuler, changed the landscape of American information policy back into something resembling that of the 1980s. Shuler says it's almost as if libraries and their advocates find themselves once again mired down in the bureaucratic information policy firefights waged during the Reagan and Bush (senior) administrations (from 1980-1992) (Shuler, John, 2002, p 157). He cites as an example the removal of reports, statistics, maps and summaries from government websites because they might reveal too much information about critical infrastructure failures to potential terrorists.

In Australia, laws known colloquially as 'cross-media restrictions' exist purportedly to fight the concentration of ownership in Australia and thus protect diversity. The reality is that two multi-billionaires – Rupert Murdoch and Kerry Packer – already have a stranglehold over the news and information industry. Michelle Gilchrist (Romei, S and Gilchrist, M, 2001, pM12) reports that most big media groups and the federal government both want the cross-media restrictions dropped. Gilchrist claims the restrictions have more to do with local politics than the realities of Australian media.

Australia has two national public broadcasters, the ABC and SBS. Given the recent government cuts to the ABC's programming and operations, former staff-elected director of the ABC Board, Quentin Dempster, comes to the conclusion that Canberra wants the ABC to be marginalised "at the insistent urgings of our competitors in media" (Dempster, Quentin, 2003, p 11). Meanwhile, Gilchrist notes that:

changing stance inevitably upsets one of the big media moguls, whether it be Kerry Packer's broadcasting group or the News Limited publishing empire. Such grief is just not worth the pain for either Labor or the Coalition, considering how few votes can be won in the arcane arena of media ownership (Romei, S and Gilchrist, M, 2001, pM12).

In Europe, policies differed from country to country, for historical reasons. Nordic countries have traditionally had a more democratic approach in that they have publicised (and made available) public information to citizens. Kangas et al report that in 1995, the European information infrastructure was being redesigned for the European Union context on the impetus of the Clinton Administration, as outlined above. The focus however was more upon aiming at ensuring private property, as opposed to safeguarding citizens' rights of access to information (Kangas et al, 1995, p 124). One of the main aims of the European Union infrastructure review was to remove legislative barriers from freely competitive information communication, which therefore gives a high priority to the private sector as a builder of the European information network (Kangas et al, 1995, p 125).

McChesney (McChesney, Robert, 1996, p 1) summarises the crux of the matter:

Since the first systems of mass media and telecommunications emerged, their control and structure have been political issues ... Perhaps the most striking feature of our current age is the increase in prominence – for economics, politics, and culture – of technologically advanced systems of communication and information, that are often global in scope. Moreover, the global communication system is in the midst of a dramatic transformation that is reorganising industries and revamping modes of regulation. Yet precisely at the historic moment that the social implications of communication appear at their greatest, the subject of how communication systems are controlled and organised and for what purposes is effectively being removed from the range of legitimate political debate, as communication is turned over to the market for profitable exploitation.

### **What to avoid**

In a provocative fiction article, *Aunt Ruth's Trunk: a futuristic scenario about the information rich-poor gap*, Beth Givens paints a bleak picture of a world of propaganda, dominated by global corporations, where only the privileged have access and privacy (Givens, Beth, 1995). As project director of the Privacy Rights Clearinghouse, Center for Public Interest Law at the University of San Diego, Givens points out that we should work to prevent a future in which:

1. powerful global corporations exercise a great deal of control over what information is allowed on the network;
2. public information policy does not have the principles of equal access and ubiquity of access as its foundation;
3. the gap between the haves and have-nots grows so wide that discontent and social unrest are a constant threat; and
4. the gap between the information haves and have-nots is so wide that even if the information poor were to gain access, they would not have the skills to make use of it.

### **What can be done**

Although some obstacles appear seemingly insurmountable and out of our control, it would be accepted amongst the profession that librarians have a social responsibility to aim for equality of access to information for all. We cannot solve all of the problems of the world. However, on both a national and an international level, and even on an individual level, there is much that can be done in order to break down the barriers and assist in reducing the gap.

### **International Initiatives**

On an international level, the IFLA Social Responsibilities Discussion Group has been active. It was officially established in December 1997 to address the role of libraries in society. It has been addressing the following issues:

- equality of access to library collections and facilities
- the growing gap between library rich and poor both within and between countries
- the 'right to know'.

By using a cooperative approach, IFLA has been attempting to reduce the international barriers as much as possible. Within the context of Dennis Ocholla's definitions (Ocholla, Dennis, 1998), IFLA has been attempting to identify and address the key issues of the information poor. Kagan (Kagan, Alfred, 2000, p28) summarises the key issues as follows:

1. rural library development
2. literacy in libraries
3. fees for service
4. human resource development
5. electronic information gap
6. cooperation between countries.

IFLA's recommendations, respectively, are as follows:

- they should develop a research program on rural library development in coordination with national library agencies;
- they should urge library and information schools to promote adult basic education skills as a component of their curricula, and also should promote literacy training as a basic library service;
- they should take a strong position against fees for basic services and should act as an advocate for public libraries in their negotiations with commercial information providers, and promote a price structure based on ability to pay;

- they should encourage library and information science schools to adopt a socially responsible orientation, including the promotion of a strong service ethic towards all population groups;
- they should promote the development of local content electronic resources, and should promote policies and develop programs that equalise access to the Internet; and
- they should promote greater resource sharing between the North and South, and should research the training needs of Southern countries in order to plan the development of appropriate information infrastructures.

### **National and Individual Initiatives**

Due to the changes in how information is produced, stored and disseminated, libraries generally are facing challenges which are without precedent. Nationally, librarians need to maintain an awareness that public libraries owe their existence to democracy, and that they are the custodians of the information. In order to protect the ideal of democracy and the rights of the information poor, librarians, whether individually or collectively, should:

- be involved in the formation of government information policies;
- act as a watchdog to ensure that those policies still have the interests of the people and equality of access at heart, rather than capital gain for transnationals;
- be aware of minority groups and underprivileged groups within their communities;
- actively promote their library's services to all sectors of their communities;
- promote information literacy;
- promote user education as a standard service in all libraries, particularly public libraries;
- promote the use of and teaching of (the Internet and) electronic resources to all sectors;
- make provision for the disabled to obtain access (eg. ramps, large print books for the vision impaired, etc);
- make provision in their collection development policies for minority groups who risk becoming marginalised (eg. talking books for the sight impaired); and
- promote reading as enjoyable (especially to children)<sup>5</sup>.

The main aims are to:

- promote information literacy
- equalise access
- act as advocates for those who cannot speak for themselves
- see the library as a link between the end-users and networked information resources
- make information available, accessible and meaningful to all.

### **Conclusion**

The old saying 'silence is golden' could well ring true – our silence means gold for the transnationals. This in turn could mean a greater gap for the information poor of the world. Libraries are a cornerstone of democracy, yet they themselves cannot speak. They risk being seen merely as the sum total of their collections or, worse still, as the buildings which those collections inhabit. It is clearly the custodians of the information who can effect change, and who can stand in the stead of the underprivileged to speak with the politicians of the world and of the nation. Much in the same way that a doctor prescribes medication to prevent a disease without the patient ever knowing how bad their demise could have been, so should librarians prescribe treatment for the information poor. Who else will plead their cause?

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<sup>5</sup> In an insightful paper, *Breaking the information blockade*, John Pateman points out that there is a correlation between deprivation and library performance. He notes Booker Prize winner James Kelman's assertion that when working class people leave school they never want to see another book in their lives. They see reading as a form of punishment (Pateman, John, 1997, p 115). By promoting reading to children, this could assist in preventing this negative view from an early age.

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<sup>6</sup> This was the prepared statement of Jerry Berman, Executive Director of the Center for Democracy and Technology, and John Morris, Director of the Broadband Access Project, before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation Subcommittee on Communications, USA, March 2, 2000

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