
Lisa J. Servon's book serves two primary purposes for researchers concerned with digital divide discourse in the United States. First, she discusses the general social framework within which inequality discussions take place. Second, Servon's analysis of the digital divide debate attempts to link U.S. federal telecommunications access policy to the outcomes of community-based networking programs. In doing so, her work extends beyond the realm of "wire-for-the-sake-of-wiring" access programs as well as the "find-the-new-digital-divide" competition that too often plagues recent work on this topic.

The premise for Servon's work—and that of Policy Link, a non-profit policy advocacy organization with which Servon co-operates—is that economic and social equality is more likely to be achieved through community-based policy initiatives. This approach suggests that equity in either of these realms is unlikely without strong community organization. Servon's examination of communication policy thus emphasizes the socially embedded nature of technological development and uses.

In the first two chapters, Servon focuses on definitions and elements of perceived digital divides. Rather than taking an approach such as the traditional universal service paradigm applied to North American telephone systems, Servon rejects the notion that simply having access to computers or the Internet may constitute adequate access to Internet-based society. As such, she focuses her attention upon digital literacy and its relation to income, gender, race, education, and geography.

Servon expands her discussion not to critique federal access policy so much, but rather to suggest the importance of Community Technology Centres (CTCs) in the U.S. Given that it was largely through community-based organizations—libraries, community centres, and community networks—that Internet content, access, and thus use developed in many American centres, Servon suggests using CTCs as a continued point of analysis. She also suggests this research approach because CTCs continue to work in communities defined by geographic proximity rather than the dispersed communities of interest and income—the focus of commercial Internet services. Servon's research suggests that CTCs focus upon the diffusion of technology and training uses to meet the needs of specific communities.

Servon does allow space for discussion of federal policy. While a good overview of U.S. policy in the area of technological access issues, the section is, overall, not a focal point of Servon's work. In a subsequent chapter she turns to a case study of Seattle's community networking initiatives and cross-organizational co-operation to establish community digital literacy and access programs. Two other chapters argue for focus upon traditional educational institutions to fill the gap in educating for digital literacy. It is within these chapters, however, that Servon's project exhibits flaws.

Too often throughout her discussion, Servon relies upon economic imperatives to justify her focus upon technological literacy; access to higher-paying jobs and college are equated with fuller participation in civil society. Closely linked to these apparent economic imperatives in Servon's argument are the advantages of youth participation in CTCs. These include the life skills inherent in responsibility, support, and structure for the purpose of preparing for the workforce. Likewise, the role of training "disadvantaged" workers for new IT jobs is suggested as another role for CTCs. Although this may, indeed, be a feasible outcome of such programs, the examples reveal Servon's economic reductionism; nowhere in the book does she suggest greater participatory involvement for the purpose of challenging policy norms or fostering democratic reform and sociopolitical participation. These outcomes are generally categorized as secondary byproducts of economic activity. The objective of Servon's work is thus not to challenge policy or governance systems, but to
simply open the doors of established economic institutions to more people within U.S. society. Civil society is only a means to establishing economic ends.

Moreover, while advocating for a greater focus upon digital literacy in American schools, Servon has difficulty advancing her own discussion beyond the basic issues of providing sufficient technological support to schools and training for teachers. While suggesting a dialogue that goes beyond technological fixes, she has difficulty suggesting how this might be done outside of government and corporate funding reallocations.

Ultimately, the shortcoming in Servon’s work is that while she highlights the importance of education and CTCs in relation to digital literacy, she does not elaborate on how policy processes might be directed to help meet these objectives. In this regard, her audience is not well defined; if she is writing for activist academics, in particular, much of what she says is not new (particularly to those working in Community Informatics—an area largely unacknowledged by Servon). What would be helpful at this point of the discussion regarding the digital divide is a framework suggesting possible points of access to influencing policy. Likewise, if she is writing for a larger audience in the policy arena, she highlights areas of socioeconomic importance for further discussion, but fails to provide a larger social policy framework within which the digital divide might be prioritized against other social issues. Unfortunately, this lack of perspective is precisely what Servon is trying to avoid; the digital divide, she argues, is to be understood as part of the larger inequality of socioeconomic resource distribution in American society.

Servon advocates a form of equality that brings individuals and groups up to speed with the technological changes that have taken place. Asking the question of how this “bringing-up-to-speed” model might work should be prefaced with a question asking whether or not this paradigm is appropriate and such a model sustainable. And what about those who do not wish to take part in such a project? There is a slippery slope inherent in this discussion.

This criticism, however, delves into the larger problems of the narrow focus taken by the larger body of work on the digital divide. Whether this body of discussion in its current form may contribute to larger social influence remains doubtful. Servon certainly improves the quality of socioeconomic analysis on the topic. She does not, however, propose a convincing rationale for a policy project around the digital divide, nor does she adequately move the discussion into a policy forum for further discussion.

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