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The authors in this collection address a fundamental paradox of postindustrial society: online digital information can be rapidly and cheaply exchanged in flexible forms, but universal connectedness to online worlds remains elusive. Despite claims to the contrary, digital divides persist, and the causes and effects of these disparities are not well understood. The authors in this collection show that digital divides exist in social, political, and technical ways.

Each of the 13 chapters in this text presents current scholarly research surrounding issues of connectedness, broadly defined. Authors in this volume ask: what does “access” mean; who cannot participate online in a robust sense, and why; how does limited access to online information affect people’s lives; and, from a public policy standpoint, what can be done to enhance connectedness for those who desire it? If it is the case that communities, the public sphere, educational resources, and government services now exist largely virtually, then improving engagement and participation in these worlds becomes an issue of social justice.

The essays in this collection approach issues of connectedness from diverse perspectives and using a variety of methodologies. Some of the topics contained in the chapters include disability studies, open-source software, virtual religious communities, the public sphere, and community-based media projects. The research methods used within the collection include content analysis, data analysis of quantitative surveys, interviews and focus groups, and critical media studies. Some chapters adopt a global, aggregate-level perspective suited for public-policy makers while others relay embodied voices and practices.

As a graduate student in the information sciences currently studying research methodologies, I was excited to use this text to study the topic of connectedness in a variety of ways. I was fascinated how such a wide array of methods could be applied to a shared set of questions. Generally, the chapters seemed to progressively increase magnification, moving from detached, global perspectives to local, subjective ones. Personally, I was fascinated with the ethnographic and case study approaches of chapters 11 and 12 and the critical approach of chapter 7. Because I study library services, I was interested in chapter 5. The final essay on black holes, chapter 13, is the perfect “fade out.”

My positionality as a library science student, educator, and researcher makes me aware of how numerous factors contribute to digital inaccessibility. The digital divide is particularly palpable in the school and library contexts that I study. In rural Pennsylvania, for example, poverty,
language, race, and education all contribute to the disparity. Still, I was surprised to learn in The Unconnected just how complex the phenomenon is, and I was also startled that there do not seem to be simple solutions. For instance, Gil-Garcia, Helbig, and Ferro state in chapter 2 that inequalities in online access and use are not solely attributable to the presence of Internet access; instead, multiple variables contribute to the inequalities, including: income, age, education, attitude, race/ethnicity, geography, English-language ability, and gender. Findings such as this disrupt techno-centric assumptions underlying popular approaches, such as the belief that merely supplying hi-tech infrastructure will improve online access and use. The authors urge public policy makers to recognize and understand the different divides of diverse populations.

I came away from The Unconnected with a view of the digital divide as a collection of socio-economic issues in addition to technical ones. I also came away feeling somewhat pessimistic about how schools and libraries alone can develop effective policies and services to combat the divides. Inequity does not seem addressable using stopgap measures at isolated institutions. For example, while Fuentes-Bautista’s case study of channelAustin in chapter 12 presents an optimistic view of community-based initiatives, it is not clear that such outcomes are generalizable.

My criticisms of The Unconnected relate to structure and organization. I felt that the challenge for this text was to balance the heterogeneous approaches of each of the chapters with a central, coherent thread. It didn’t seem that the consistent themes of connectedness and digital divides prevented me from encountering jarring transitions as I moved from chapter to chapter. As a whole, the text consists of 13 essays arranged into 4 sections: context, conduit, content, and communication. Ostensibly, the chapters in each section present research findings related to that section’s theme; however, I didn’t feel that the categories were clearly defined; I felt that the sequencing of the chapters was somewhat arbitrary; and I felt that the organization of the book did not enhance my understanding. That said, each chapter by itself stood on its own. Perhaps transitions could have been improved by
framing each section with an introduction stating how the chapters in the section relate.

In order to provide the potential reader with a fuller understanding of the text, I feel that it is necessary not only to generalize about the book as a whole, but also to speak to each chapter. The topics, approaches, and methodologies vary widely. Below, I describe what I feel are the salient aspects of each essay, and I try to include what I believe to be the central ideas, methodologies, and findings. I hope that the summaries help potential readers to identify individual essays relevant to their own research and interests.

In chapter 1, “Connectedness and Political Attitude and Behavior,” Costas Panagopoulos analyzes data collected in the 2008 American National Election Study (ANES) to identify possible relationships between reported Internet access and other “demographic and political traits, including age, race, gender, education, income, partisanship, and ideology” (p. 10). Panagopoulos also analyzes data from the same survey to identify relationships between Internet access and political beliefs and behavior, finding that those without Internet access are “simply disengaged from the political process compared to those who are connected” (p. 18). The results of this study suggest that Internet access is significantly related to political engagement.

In chapter 2, “Understanding the Multi-Dimensionality of the Digital Divide: Empirical Evidence from Italy,” J. Ramon Gil-Garcia, Natalie C. Helbig, and Enrico Ferro present findings from a sample of residents (n=2206) in the Piedmont region of Italy. In their analysis, the authors compare the explanatory power of an “Access Divide Model” to a “Multi-Dimensional Divide Model” in terms of Internet access and use. They find that the Multi-Dimensional Divide Model better explains Internet access and use, concluding that “Internet access is necessary for Internet use, but it is not the only important factor for an extensive and meaningful use of the Internet” (p. 38). For example, “IT skills,...education,...attitude toward computers, employment status, gender, PC use experience, and the ability to speak English are important determinants of both Internet access and Internet use” (pp. 38-39). It is clear from these findings that public policy makers must
consider the heterogeneous needs of populations in addition to providing Internet access.

In chapter 3, “Connecting Disability: New Modes of Participation and Engagement,” Gerard Goggin investigates the challenges of connectedness for those with disabilities. Specifically, he examines the provisions contained in the 2006 UN Disability Convention declaration, to what extent they offer a realistic portrayal of the needs of disabled communities, and to what extent the provisions have been implemented. Goggin finds that the Convention declaration’s provisions, built upon the UN’s 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are landmark advancements for understanding and addressing the information technology needs of disabled people. Widespread adoption of the provision has been slow but perceivable. Goggin cites the example of Apple smartphones that were introduced in 2007 but did not contain accessibility software until 2009. While an increase in apps suggests promise for accessible mobile technologies, Goggin believes that disabled persons will likely continue to rely on individual customization and user innovation of information technologies. Advocacy and education are necessary to include disabled persons in design processes (p. 59).

In chapter 4, “Systematic Considerations for Addressing ‘Online Dead Zones’ Impeding the Social Engagement of Persons with a Disability: Policy and Practice Implications,” John C. Bricout, Abiy Agiro, and Alex Casiano relate how digital information and communication technologies present people with disabilities social and political challenges in addition to technological ones. The authors state that “much of what constitutes the 21st century ‘polis’ has taken on a virtual guise, beginning and, increasingly, ending with a Web-based interaction using [information and communication technologies]” (p. 69). The essay discusses the potential benefits for disabled persons to participate in online social networks and develop online social networks. The authors identify “social innovation” as a potential solution for transforming digital inequalities for those with disabilities.

In chapter 5, “Placing Connectedness: Libraries Virtual and Proximate,” David Jensen and James W. Harrington, Jr. complicate the notion of access by addressing the ways
in which place and distance present barriers for the poor, homeless, and lower-middle class. Even those with IT skills and experience may not possess a digital device or have Internet access. A conversation with a university student in a local public library leads the authors to a case study of Seattle’s public library system and the University of Washington library, revealing barriers of distance, time, space, and uneven distribution of computer terminals in relation to high-need populations. The library at the University of Washington presents special restrictions on computer use and Internet availability. It was upsetting to me as a library researcher and former library worker that such barriers exist, but I also realize that they are very real.

In chapter 6, “The Reach of Open Source Software,” Douglas Noonan analyzes the diffusion of open-source software (OSS) into marginalized or “unconnected” subpopulations. Proponents of OSS, Noonan maintains, boast that OSS is “more democratic or communitarian; OSS is cheaper; OSS is more customizable; OSS is more inclusive; OSS is more creative and innovative; and OSS is free to all” (p. 104). If these assertions are true, then Noonan believes that OSS activity should be greater in nations with more young, elderly, poor, rural, illiterate, and technologically- and economically disadvantaged populations. In order to test this hypothesis, Noonan uses two indices he co-developed, the Open-Source Activity Index (OSAI) and the Open-Source Potential Index (OSPI), to rank-order nations according to OSS activity and assign each nation an OSS ratio value. He then compares each nation’s OSS activity to the size of its marginalized subpopulations, finding an inverse relation. Using multivariate regression, Noonan also finds that OSS activity and OSS potential do not share a positive relationship with potentially unconnected subpopulations. Noonan concludes that the rhetoric around OSS remains unsupported.

In chapter 7, “Locus Communis: The Unconnected In and Within Virtual Worlds,” Jeremy Hunsinger distinguishes between what it means to be “in” and “within” a virtual world. The distinguishing characteristic among those “in” and “within” a virtual world is infrastructural knowledge. Those who are “in” a virtual world co-create a set of shared experiences, memories, and narratives within the
virtual “commonplace,” but they do not apprehend the governing codes within the system (pp. 126-127). In contrast, those who are “within” a virtual world, who may or may not also be “in” the world, possess “knowledge of infrastructures and the mechanics of governance” (p. 130). For Hunsinger, this in/within distinction presents three categories of unconnected. First are those “within” a virtual world but not “in” it, such as designers and content creators. They govern the virtual world without insider knowledge. Next are those who are not “in” a virtual world but who may nevertheless be governed by one if the meanings of the virtual world spill over into their everyday lives. Finally there are those unconnected who resist or leave the virtual world. For Hunsinger, all categories of unconnected present tensions within virtual commonplaces.

In chapter 8, “The Study of Digital Connectedness: A Case for Public Informatics,” Thomas Jacobson and Susan L. Jacobson envision a virtual public sphere to replace traditional journalism, one comprised of “new news” media (p. 152). For the authors, the digital divide is not so much a technological problem as it is a disintegration of citizen engagement in discussions of common interest. Emerging digital information forms that may reinvigorate a public sphere include independent news organizations, such as IndyMedia; citizen news sites and blogs; government- or privately-sponsored databases, such as Google Maps; collaborative databases, such as YouTube, Flickr, and Wikipedia; and social media networks or networks enabled by SMS text messaging, such as Facebook and Twitter. The authors conclude with a clarion call for public informatics, defined by them as a subfield of social or community informatics “focusing on information technologies that may support public discourse for collective and democratic self-governance” (p. 164).

In chapter 9, “Attachment, Connectivity, and Virtual Belief Communities,” Paul M. A. Baker explores the possibility of community as it applies to religious and spiritual groups online. Unlike traditional communities that share a sense of place, virtual communities are non-proximate and do not engage in face-to-face interactions. Given these differences, virtual religious communities remain “thinly” connected by members’ levels of interest
or commitment (pp. 177, 188), and analysis of virtual communities must emphasize communication, not place (p. 170). Baker suggests that while virtual communities such as Buddhist groups or spiritual seekers in Second Life may offer potential community spaces for physically-disparate participants and for those with disabilities (pp. 184-185), virtual communities that do not reflect pre-existing real-world connectedness may be unsustainable.

In chapter 10, “Democracy to Technocracy: Tyranny of the Majority in the Information Age,” Andrew C. Ward asks to what extent unequal access to digital communication technologies poses the risk of political underrepresentation for those not connected to online networks. Individuals and entities now routinely eschew traditional understandings of proximate communities as they broadcast their virtual communities’ views and interests online. If it is the case the democracy requires open, participatory discussion by all involved, and if it is the case that this discussion is now largely relegated to virtual contexts that may limit participation to those with online access, then a virtual public sphere may be exclusionary. Ward urges a reflective use of online communication technologies to foster open, participatory discourse.

In chapter 11, “The New Minority: The Willfully Unconnected,” Jarice Hanson presents findings from in-depth interviews she conducted with 26 middle-class urban residents who are “willfully unconnected” to digital technologies (p. 224). The majority of interviewees responded that they saw no need for portable digital technologies like cell phones. The choices of these interviewees contrast with national survey trends of mobile device possession and disrupt general perceptions that more and more people desire mobile communication devices. Hanson frames the choices of the “new minority” as reactions to the rising stresses of urban life (pp. 230-231). The perceptions of the interviewees in this study, combined with Hanson’s analysis of the human costs associated with the production of mobile technology, seem to demand that we reexamine our techno-utopian vision of gadgets and ever-present digital connectedness.

In chapter 12, “Redistributing the Wealth of Networks: Digital Community Media and Social Inclusion,” Martha Fuentes-Bautista examines the public use of and
engagement with channelAustin, a non-profit organization that manages 3 public-access channels in Austin, Texas. According to Fuentes-Bautista, Austin shifted from an industrial economy to a knowledge-based economy by investing in university research and hi-tech infrastructure and by attracting IT firms such as Dell (pp. 244-245). The transition to post-industry also resulted in income disparities, rising real-estate prices, and the forced migration of Hispanic and African-American communities. Fuentes-Bautista asks how digital networks such as channelAustin can “break the cycle of reproduction of inequalities…in the American technopolis” (p. 247). Through focus groups with producers and users, data analysis of channelAustin’s operation database, and semi-structured interviews with representatives from non-profit organizations, Fuentes-Bautista finds that the station fosters an open atmosphere, engages a broad audience, offers attractive training programs and equipment, and supports local creative culture. These findings suggest that the appropriation of digital communications technologies can break cycles of economic and social marginalization.

In chapter 13, “Black Holes in the Electronic Galaxies: Metaphor for Resistance in the Information Society?” Barry Vacker and Agreen Wang trace a pattern in the genealogies of “light” and “dark” within the fields of philosophy, cosmology, film, media theory, and media technologies (p. 272). For the authors, “light” represents growing knowledge and surveillance, whereas “dark” represents resistance and concealment. Trends in art and media suggest that society is becoming more invasive. Just as the gravitational pull of a dying star forms a black hole allowing no escape for light, so, too, can participants in today’s information society form black holes in their networks to protect personal information from mass surveillance. The unconnected, therefore, are those who “exit from light as a mode of resistance” (p. 288).

In sum, I feel that The Connected gave me a fuller understanding of digital divides. The text transformed my binary “have/have not” understanding of connectedness to one encompassing broader social, political, and critical viewpoints. The chapters address the topic of connectedness in a number of diverse ways, and I believe
these varied approaches will help inform future research in this area.

About the Reviewer

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