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Digital Inclusion in Waltham, MA

by kanarinka | Published September 18, 2012

Last week's topic in Intro to Civic Media was Digital Inequality. Aviva and Alexander wrote <u>a great summary</u> <u>post</u> of our readings and conversation.

As they describe, we traced the evolution of thinking around digital inequality from its inception as a "digital divide" – a binary of being online or not – to being seen as a more complex and phased process. One interesting concept proposed by Hargattai was "autonomy of use" – when and where do people have access? People do different things with Internet in the home versus Internet for an hour at the local library. And there are stages of literacy – do people know how to get around on the Internet? Can they accomplish tasks like information gathering, and emailing? Can they use the Internet for their benefit, i.e. to find a job or sell some stuff? In this case, I was thinking of my in-laws who have email and Internet but find the process of using the computer extremely onerous. For them, moving paperwork, banking and administrative things to the Internet is anything but convenient as it often takes them double or triple the time to accomplish things.



Waltham, MA

My family moved around a lot when I was growing up – North Carolina to Virginia to Alabama and then Michigan. I came out to Boston to go to college and ended up staying in the area afterwards. So while I'm not "from" Waltham, MA, where I currently live, it is the place where I have lived the longest (since 2004).

Waltham is a <u>super rocking hometown</u>. Historically it was a seat of the Industrial Revolution and an early center for the labor movement. Francis Cabot Lowell first developed his "Lowell System" at the Boston Manufacturing Company on the banks of the Charles. Though 82% white, Waltham is home to significant populations of Ugandans and Latinos. It's actually been nicknamed "Little Kampala" because there are so many Ugandans living there. And we have three Indian grocery stores that Indians from all over Massachusetts travel to on the weekends to buy their food. While you can tell it's gentrifying based on

walking up and down Moody Street, the diversity of clothing, languages and cultures is pretty wonderful. This weekend my family and I went to the Waltham Community Day festival on the Common and all bought Waltham hats.

Since this post is supposed to be about Digital Inequality and not just promoting my city, I will return to the topic at hand.



Model of Digital Inclusion

I was in the "Crazy, Confusing Mind-Map" group last week where we ran out of time to refine our brainstorm into an actual model for digital inclusion. Some of the most important aspects from the model (from my point of view) were infrastructure, geography in relation structural equality, literacy and grassroots efforts. From an infrastructure point of view, Waltham is wired. It sits on the I-95 "technology belt" and is home to numerous multinational corporations along with Brandeis University, Bentley College and BU's Center for Digital Imaging. There are multiple options for signing up for Internet access if you can afford it.

I was struck by Modarres' and Pitkin's spatial analysis in "Technology and the Geography of Inequality in Los Angeles" and would be curious to see this methodology applied to Waltham. The lower-income, less-English speaking and more racially diverse areas of Waltham tend to be in the South near its downtown area. However, in contrast to LA, the south side of Waltham is the most well-connected from a public transportation perspective with multiple buses and commuter rail trains. Additionally, there are numerous community centers that provide free Internet access among various other services like ESL classes and job services and these are walkable from downtown. These include places like <u>Watch CDC</u>, the <u>Charles River Public Internet Center</u>, the <u>Community Day Center</u> and the <u>Waltham Public Library</u>. And if you have your own laptop there are several cafes downtown that offer free wireless access.

But as we have discussed access is only one dimension. From cursory research it was hard for me to find information about literacy and education programs beyond the above-mentioned community centers. For example, it would be interesting to know how Waltham public schools are integrating technology into the curriculum given unequal access to computers at home. Or if the City of Waltham has addressed technology access and literacy in any way (I was unable to find information about this). Of the community centers, the Charles River Public Internet Center is the only one that runs formal classes where community members can get up to speed with the Internet.

This would be an area for future research, as well as looking more closely at the demographics of Waltham to see who may or may not be connected, and what they do with that access. From there we might be able to determine what kinds of grassroots, education and local government initiatives might better address the structural inequalities in relation to technology use and access in Waltham.

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