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The Internet Citizenry: Access and Participation

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Karen Mossberger, Caroline J. Tolbert, and Ramona S. McNeal, *Digital Citizenship: The Internet, Society and Participation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007). 221 pp. ISBN: 9780262134859, \$47.00 (cloth); ISBN: 9780262633536, \$19.00 (paper).

Ronald J. Deibert, John G. Palfrey, Rafal Rohozinski, and Jonathan Zittrain, eds., *Access Denied: The Practice and Policy of Global Internet Filtering* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008). 449 pp. ISBN: 9780262042451, \$45.00 (cloth); ISBN: 9780262541961, \$20.00 (paper).

The growth and expanded development of the Internet will continue to foster new opportunities and challenges for government entities. Two recent books, *Digital Citizenship* and *Access Denied*, explore these contemporary challenges of an Internet citizenry and lay out opportunities for the forthcoming generations. In each case, we are confronted by the responsibility of public administrators to foster the Internet society to become a place where full, active participation is possible while simultaneously balancing the need to censor violence or pornography on the Internet without infringing on inherent freedoms and rights. Each book poses

key questions for public administrators as well as for students and scholars of the field to consider as the Internet reaches new levels of functionality.

Digital Citizenship, authored by Karen Mossberger, Caroline J. Tolbert, and Ramona S. McNeal, focuses on the public and its relationship with the Internet, but most importantly, it challenges government entities in fostering the digital age. The authors explore the concept of membership in a digital society and its evolving definitions. Building on Rogers Smith's definitions of citizenship in the United States, they identify three traditions applicable to society and the Internet: liberalism, civic republicanism, and ascriptive hierarchy.

The U.S. tradition of citizenship in the context of liberalism is rooted in individual rights, free market, and the right to pursue one's "own vision of good life" (4). Under the economic realm of equal opportunity, Web sites serve as a medium for finding jobs and researching employers. Limitations to online participation challenge the concept of a liberal citizenship and may foster an inability to be economically competitive in a free market.

The second tradition of citizenship, civic republicanism, is grounded in widespread citizen participation.

The authors set out to show how the Internet can facilitate civic participation while improving community engagement. They argue that to the extent that information technology enhances information capacity and mobilizes civic participation, “it may be defended in terms of republican traditions of citizenship” (6).

The final tradition of citizenship is ascriptive hierarchy. This tradition highlights the exclusion of large segments of the population from full citizenship based on ascriptive characteristics such as race, gender, and ethnicity. The authors argue that racial segregation, poverty, and other inequalities have shaped society online. The digital divide is an issue not only of computer access but also of high-speed broadband access and, increasingly, of online skills as well. The authors suggest that “disparities online deepen existing inequalities and hinder full participation in society” (9). The goal of all levels of government should be to broaden access and skill support for the Internet, increasing the equality of opportunity and membership in the political community and society as a whole.

The authors broadly define digital citizens as those who use the Internet regularly and effectively. The term “digital citizenship” is not narrowly defined as just having technological access to the Internet but also having online educational competencies. The authors point out that societal deficiencies such as poverty, illiteracy, and unequal educational opportunities further divide people from full online participation and digital citizenship. The concept of citizenship in an online society is a critical point when considering that a significant number of Americans (27 percent) still do not use the Internet. Furthermore, of those going online, not all are frequent online visitors, reducing the percentage of “digital citizens” to only 48 percent of the U.S. population (based on 2006 data).

Using the threefold framework of citizenship, the authors examine national information technology data and the impact of the Internet on society. They analyze data from national opinion surveys conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, as well as the American National Election Studies and the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey. The data sets vary from year to year, and although they represent the most recent data available, it should be noted that some analyses merge data from as far back as 2003 to the more recent data from 2007. Most importantly, the research differs from previous studies in that the authors utilize multivariate regression rather than descriptive statistics and case studies alone. Although the book is data rich, and those unfamiliar with the various forms of regression may not find the statistics appealing, the presentation of the findings is clear and informative.

The first research question addressed is the impact that the use of the computer has on income. They assess the impact that the use of the Internet at work has on weekly earnings and household income. Controlling for various factors, there is clear evidence that technology use at work is related to higher wages. The authors follow their economic analysis with a question of civic engagement. They find that gathering news from the Internet fosters an increase in political participation, specifically, political discussion, political knowledge, and political interest. Along the same line, the authors then ask whether the Internet’s potential for enhancing civic engagement also leads to greater participation in democratic politics. Utilizing voting data, they find that in high-interest elections (presidential elections), the use of the Internet increases the likelihood of voting. Given the various and increasing forms of online communication, the opportunities for increased civic engagement and participation become more apparent.

The authors next turn their attention to the concept of access and the digital divide. Based on survey data, they find that technology disparities based on race and ethnicity persist despite overall growth of Internet use. Only 21 percent of African Americans and 18 percent of Latinos were identified as digital citizens, well below the national average. Broadband access reflects many of the same gaps apparent in computer and Internet disparities. Broadband access is critical for applications such as teleconferencing, distance learning, and Internet accessibility for people with disabilities. Broadband access is significant for digital citizenship as well as participation in economic and political activities online. Contrary to those who argue that we have closed the digital divide, the studies in *Digital Citizens* find that nearly half of the U.S. population is being left behind from active online participation, with the greater impact on ethnic and racial minorities.

Digital Citizens concludes with the authors’ platform for addressing online inequalities and accessibility. They suggest that the building blocks for citizenship in the information age are quality public education combined with universal access to the Internet. Occasional use of the Internet is insufficient for digital citizenship given the substantial economic benefits for those who use the Internet, as well as the impact on the development of civic participation. This should be a critical concern for public administration. If Internet use enhances civic engagement and political participation, then the exclusion from digital citizenship exacerbates existing inequalities, based on race, ethnicity, income and education. They conclude that policies to promote digital citizenship are underfunded. Municipal wireless access to the Internet is one approach that local government can take that can help address issues of access. From a policy and administrative perspective, the

question of civic responsibility in an information and technology age is left for scholars and administrators to consider.

The second book reviewed, *Access Denied*, follows a similar line of questioning of civic and government responsibility in regard to the Internet. The editors, Ronald J. Deibert, John G. Palfrey, Rafal Rohozinski, and Jonathan Zittrain, put together a collection of chapters focused on the study of government filtering practices throughout the world. Although there are ongoing international e-government studies (Holzer and Kim 2003; West 2007), few studies have taken an exhaustive and detailed approach toward understanding the practices of Internet filtering. *Access Denied* is, as the editors point out, the first systematic, academic, and rigorous study of all known state-mandated Internet filtering practices.

Filtering systems are meant to stop citizens from accessing parts of the Internet deemed too sensitive by governments. State-mandated blocking ranges from politics to sexuality to culture to religion. Through a research collaboration with the University of Chicago, Harvard Law School, the University of Toronto, and the Oxford Internet Institute, a comprehensive study found that more than three dozen states around the world filter the Internet to some degree. The collaborating institutions (OpenNet Initiative) have been conducting ongoing studies of Internet filtering since 2002, but in 2006, their empirical testing of 40 nations served as the basis for the book. The methodological approach included mapping out filtering practices of nations as well as the laws and regulations behind them.

The detailed reports on each nation represent a starting point in understanding the nature and future of global Internet filtering. The editors view a trend of increased regulation that they seek to document. Testing was done by compiling a series of Web sites that covered topics from gambling, pornography, and crude humor to political satire and Web sites that documented human rights abuses and corruption. They evaluated the breadth and depth of filtering. The research found that state-mandated filtering is predominantly clustered in three areas: East Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East/North Africa.

Many nations have some form of limited Internet filtering. For example, in the United States, libraries and schools have specific content filtering, but access is not limited at most other public Internet points. Private access also is open throughout the country without government filtering; however, recent legislation aims to curtail this to some degree. In June 2008, three major Internet service providers—Verizon, Sprint, and Time Warner Cable—announced that

they would restrict Web site and online discussion groups associated with child pornography. Although the agreement was made between New York State attorney general Andrew Cuomo and the three service providers, the access restrictions would impact the entire United States, and negotiations are in the process to expand such efforts to other Internet service providers (Hakim 2008).

Efforts to block a particular page or topic area must contend with the countless Web pages and applications that are constantly created. As a result, not all pages will be blocked. Utilizing the cheapest and crudest methods, governments may partake in over-blocking. Broad Internet filtering can be interpreted as an infringement of one's civil liberties and human rights. On the other hand, states have a responsibility and right to control domestic matters regardless of where they take place—online or offline. The future of the Internet and, to some degree, international politics will revolve around these core competing issues.

In addition to civil liberties, *Access Denied* also evaluates government transparency. For example, countries such as Saudi Arabia are very clear about Web sites they block, and individuals are notified that the page they are attempting to view is blocked and have the option to request access through a government Web site. On the other hand, Tunisia blocks pages and directs visitors to an error page, "presumably to disguise" their blocking (15).

Access Denied provides an excellent starting point and a wealth of data for Internet filtering. The book would benefit those interested in information technology and government issues, as well as political science scholars addressing civil liberties and transparency. The book also highlights, but does not report on, Internet monitoring. The research found that many nations, in particular the United States, are aggressive when it comes to monitoring online activity. From Internet blocking to government transparency and online monitoring, *Access Denied* poses key questions for government's role and responsibility in the digital age.

Classic models of e-government trends and expectations are continuously challenged, requiring fresh and new studies (Calista and Melitski 2007; Coursey and Norris 2008). Both books provide a contemporary look at key questions for public administration and issues of the Internet. *Digital Citizens* looks at what it means to be an active citizen in society today, while highlighting the need for continued effort to close the digital divide. The importance of having government intervention is proposed as a core component for national digital citizenship, while *Access Denied* warns against having too much government intervention.

Both books begin critical discussions that are relevant to all public administration students, scholars, and practitioners.

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