

**Everlasting Information:**

A Brief Exploration of Creating Sustainable Information Societies

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The definition of an information society has been argued upon and necessarily changed as the information used to create such a definition became more widely known or accepted. It can be hard to pin down what, exactly, defines an “information society,” especially as we discover new information, and new information *about* information each day as our societies move forward. As we, as intellectuals, grow wiser and older and can make more connections in the world. As we are able to think more critically. Information is an ever-evolving concept; so, with its constant changing, how are we to build and create a supposed “information society,” and one that will not collapse in on itself when the deviations from its original definition spread too far?

An information society can loosely be defined, or at least conceptually constructed by, economic criteria, Information and Communication Technology (ITC) infrastructure, physical infrastructure, and human intellectual capacity aspects. It is constantly evolving and growing its information. (Holmner 2013, 13) as each of those criteria change and human intellectual capacity adjusts accordingly. In the middle ages, the human intellectual capacity for a clergyman, for instance, varied greatly from that of a pastor or preacher today. The clergyman of old might have needed to more readily have exact excerpts or placement of relevant Holy texts memorized for reciting, lest he end up having to manually search each page of his bible for the specific reference he needed. By contrast, a church leader of today can simply google relevant terms on his cell phone to discover the passage he only vaguely recalled, without losing face or time with his congregation. It is, of course, this availability of information is what makes the current US society qualify as an “information society.” But in comparison to the middle ages, so were the mid-1990s when the internet became a public entity. And by comparison to that, the current US society is a remarkably forward information society—and yet it still leaves much to be desired.

There is information at the fingertips of many, but the current political climate does not invest in continuing an Information Society in an accessible and sustainable (and therefore practical and beneficial) way.

The answer to this problem seems obvious to those in the field of Library Information Sciences (as it supports our chosen field), but appears in practice to allude lawmakers and government bigwigs. “To create meaningful content for users, or in other words, to generate value in an information society, it is important to identify users’ needs and specifications and tailor the products and service offerings, as well as channels delivering such offerings, accordingly” (Hanafizadeh 2015, 886). Those who are best in a place to encourage information societies by funding or supporting their availability and continued existence fail to identify user needs or channels appropriately. “Misconceptions about personal computers or broadband being in virtually all Americans homes are quickly dispelled when considering the level of demand that is currently placed on public libraries’ technological infrastructure” (Bertot 2016, 277). Yet lawmakers forget that an estimated 43 million people in the US are currently living in poverty (UC Davis) and unlikely to own a personal computer or the broadband service to access the internet on one if they have managed to procure such a device. This is a giant gap in our ability to fully utilize or continue a positive information society into the future: and may hinder the US from truly being the information society it wants to be. An estimated calculation through the Tulsa City-County Library’s value assessment calculator supposes that 50 hours of free computer/internet usage over the course of a year (or roughly an hour a week) at a public library can save an individual \$600- the price of a computer, or the cost of rent in some cases.

Though computer prices are more accessible, the cost of broadband service (\$40/month for the slowest service with AT&T, or \$480/year, not including taxes and/or fees) can make the

lowering cost of a simple computer almost irrelevant. People are continuously choosing to access computers and information via their library, indicating they do not have adequate, or any, access at their homes. According to research:

35.9% of public libraries overall report that they have a wait time for public access computers at some point on most days, with 62.1% of city libraries reporting such issues. It is worth noting that, although home broadband access is more readily available in populated areas and city libraries average the highest number of public access computers, they are still overwhelmed in terms of demand not just for broadband but for broadband connections inclusive of computer terminals. (Bertot 2016, 276-277)

Therein lies the answer to fixing the faults in our information society: better access and inclusion in our digital age for all. Short of a supremely well off and generous being donating free computers and Wi-Fi to all from their personal bank account, access to the benefits of an Information Society (benefits that also encourage an interest in sustaining it's future and the knowledge of how to do so) lie in continuing to fund and further the ability of public libraries to assist their patronage. A digitally inclusive culture is encouraged by the training offered through librarians and their digital partners, and "strong public libraries are key components of bridging the digital divide [that creates weaknesses in an Information Society], yet receive little recognition or resources from local governments to achieve their goals. Public libraries take their role in promoting digital inclusion seriously" (Bertot 2016, 274).

As Bertot goes on to discuss, corporations and other government offices benefit greatly from the databases, training opportunities, job preparedness, and local knowledge that public libraries provide to communities, and could be an integral part in encouraging these integral aspects of Information Societies. "It would be logical to use more of the tax dollars that are collected from companies and put them into public libraries" (286), but this isn't happening. Instead, "we're starting to behave as if we've reached the end of human knowledge. And while that notion is undoubtedly false, the sensation of certitude it generates is paralyzing"

(Klosterman 2016, 10). People proclaim knowledge is out there on the internet and that's the end of it (and that libraries are no longer relevant because of it) and forget that access to that information is *half of that information in the first place*. Access to that information, and the skills necessary for finding that information, are available (free to the public) at public libraries to bridge the digital divide and help heal the holes in an Information Societies beating heart: information and access to it.

“History is a creative process. The world happens as it happens, but we construct what we want to remember and what we forget. And people will eventually do that to us, too” (Klosterman 2016, 58). The world continues claims to be a growing Information Society, one that is vast and all-knowing with the availability of the internet. It forgets the cracks in the system that hinder it, and that could eventually break it. The more we stifle society's ability to navigate an Information Society, the more we are slowly strangling its progress. By supporting public libraries and their access to information, we can strengthen the infrastructure of an Information Society to truly make it a progressive and forward-moving mechanism with positive benefits in our lives. We can be remembered, and we can leave behind not just the history that we constructed, but the history that actually was, because new users will be able to find it in the Information Society we've grown and built.

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