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In Review: Global information inequalities: Bridging the information gap

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In Review: Global information inequalities: Bridging the information gap

Charbonneau, Deborah H. (Ed.) (2008). *Global information inequalities: Bridging the information gap*. Oxford, England: Chandos Publishing.
236 pp. ISBN 978-1-84334-362-2 (hardback) \$119.95; 978-1-84334-361-5 (paperback) \$69.95.

Is information inequality caused by a lack of things, such as library buildings, books, computers, and electricity? Or is it caused by a disconnect between what librarians offer and what people need (or think they need)? Such questions are implicit in this collective work, which includes contributions by librarians and academics who have brought information service to underserved people on five continents.

That some populations have better access to information than others, and that this inequality poses a serious problem, are assumed in this book, rather than demonstrated and quantified. This is an unfortunate lack, because one would like to know the extent to which poverty, rurality, illiteracy, linguistic or ethnic minority status, and gender contribute to inequality. Nor is the goal defined as clearly as it might be. Is it equal access for all, equal use by all, or simply amelioration of current disparities?

The unstated consensus among the thirteen chapters of *Global Information Inequalities* favors amelioration, achieved through efforts at service provision. We learn about a Canadian organization that built the first public library in Angola's second-largest city; about a Malaysian government program to bring libraries to the interior of Sarawak, where there are no roads; about a California foundation that improves library service in rural western China; and about a Tanzanian government effort to create community resource centers in villages in the south of that country. The developed world is represented too, by chapters describing a Canadian program to furnish books to blind people; MedlinePlus Go Local, an offshoot of MEDLINE in the United States that provides consumer health information and local listings of low-cost healthcare providers; current American practices in the effective use of bookmobiles; and an Icelandic program to supply free research databases to every IP address in that island nation.

All of these programs are worth reading about, but too often building the structure that delivers information seems to be an end in itself. Do people use the information

that these structures make available to them? The creators of a library in a remote village in Peru's Amazon region candidly tell us that schoolchildren read the books there, but stop reading once they reach adulthood. On the other hand, in western China, village adults exert peer pressure on each other to borrow library books. How culture interacts with information is the big under-explored topic of this book. Literacy level and language-minority status are other areas that would have benefited from more attention. In Sarawak, the state library has established rural branches where people can use a computer for the first time. What do they find online, when their language is spoken by thousands of people, rather than millions? The problem is alluded to, but no more than that. A similar problem arises when people lack the knowledge or interest to use the information made available to them. Even in highly-developed Iceland, most users of the free databases are researchers or professionals.

The wisest contribution here, because it places these issues front and center, comes from Edgardo Civillano, an Argentine academic, who describes his own and others' efforts to bring information resources to indigenous peoples in Latin America. Civillano argues that information professionals must listen to local people and find ways to empower them. Successful programs focus on preserving local lore as much as on bringing information in from the outside world. The key, Civillano writes, is to think locally, to understand and respect the people we would serve, and to aim for small improvements in information use. This focus on the would-be user is neither easy nor grandiose, but it looks like the way forward.

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