

Closing the Digital Divide: How Online Environments Battle Information Poverty



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We live in a digital world where information is the coin of the realm. Those who have the skills and resources to create, disseminate, discover and access knowledge have a clear advantage when it comes to activities like job hunting, applying for housing, or connecting with communities. The Internet has become so ingrained in daily life that it's easy to assume everyone has access or instinctively knows how to navigate online resources. However, the reality is that thousands of Canadians are cut off from the benefits of increasingly high-tech lifestyles. The accessibility gap between the information rich and the information poor, commonly referred to as the digital divide, is growing in Canada. In many cases, this division parallels social roles; those who are marginalized in society, most often by poverty, are on the outskirts of the digital world as well.

I first heard of the digital divide three years ago while working on my Master of Library and Information Studies degree at Dalhousie University. Prior to that, the concept of information poverty had never occurred to me. When I read about the topic, I realized how many online activities I took for granted. I lived in a world where there was an abundance of laptops, mobile devices, and free Wi-Fi. However, the reality in Canada is that a dichotomy exists “between those with easy access to an abundance of information and those who don’t [know] how and where to find it... and do not understand the value of information and how it can help them in their daily lives” (Goulding, 2001, p. 109).

Around that time, I discovered a blogging site called [Homeless Nation](#). It was created by filmmaker Daniel Cross specifically for the homeless community in Canada. The purpose is to offer an “online home for those who have none, and [serve] as a tool for learning, social justice and positive change” (Homeless Nation, 2009, para. 10). For the next fourteen months, I worked on a [thesis project](#) that examined if the website serves as a tool that aids the homeless in the development of a) digital literacy skills, b) information seeking behaviors and c) relationships in online communities. Ultimately, I wanted to discover if the site prevented the solidification of social roles and segregation of marginalized communities that result in the digital divide.

What I discovered surprised me. When I started the study, I expected that users wanted straight-up bits of information about where to find jobs, locate housing, or access services. As I observed the site, I found that the majority of posts discussed homelessness. More interesting was the fact that the discussions were extrospective in nature; they didn't focus on why specific individuals are homeless, but focused on why homelessness exists in Canada at all.

Because conversations examined poverty from a social rather than personal perspective, there was a deep sense of inclusion within the user community. When I looked at the social roles of site users (many had self-identified with social groups in public user profiles) I found that a broad range of people were drawn to the blog. This included social workers, researchers, human rights advocates, the formerly homeless, and the homeless. In the vast majority of cases, representatives from all social groups discussed homelessness together and brought their unique perspectives to the table. It seemed that the extrospective nature of conversations created a collaborative environment where everyone contributed ideas or strategies to address issues surrounding homelessness on a national level.

Even though it seemed like the site promoted communication between the homeless and mainstream society, I still wanted to look for instances of marginalization to find out if they were based on social roles. I found that users on the outskirts of the community represented a variety of social groups. After looking at their usage trends, it was clear that marginalization occurred when users didn't write posts or comments. Essentially, establishment within the community had nothing to do with social roles but entirely on an individual's willingness to participate and contribute ideas to discussion.

At the end of the study, I realized that one of the strengths of Homeless Nation is that it provides the homeless community with cognitive authority over their experiences. Essentially, homeless users are free to express their opinions, feelings and needs in an online environment that is relatively free from stereotypes and segregation. It provides a space where there is validation, acceptance and opportunities to break down social barriers through constructive communication.

Information poverty thrives in environments where there is exclusion based on a lack of community, poor links to social networks and exclusion from public services (Bure, 2006). Virtual environments like Homeless Nation demonstrate that people from all walks of life can find common ground in discussions about the social implications of poverty. The development of online initiatives that encourage dialogue between the homeless community and mainstream society are a preventative measure against the solidification of social roles that contribute to the digital divide.

To view the full thesis project discussed in this post, please visit: [Homeless Bound: A Search for Digital Literacy within the Realm of Social Media](#)

References

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