ARTICLE

Challenges of social good in the world of *Grand Theft Auto* and *Barbie*: a case study of a community computer center for youth

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Abstract

This paper presents a case study of a community technology center (CTC) located in a lower income neighborhood of a high-tech city. Participant observation and interview-based research determined that while the CTC was popular among its targeted constituents, its use was not consistent with what the center's supporters and policymakers envisioned. The emergent discrepancy between policymaker rhetoric and actual use is analyzed in light of different understandings of how internet access is perceived as a social good by policymakers, funders, and among disadvantaged communities. The article raises questions and suggests policy implications regarding how those most at-risk use community technology centers, how those centers may be funded, and how the relationship of computers and the social good must be reconceptualized to better address the issues of the digital divide that extend beyond the technological realm.

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INTRODUCTION

A recent report titled 'A Nation Online', released by the US Department
of Commerce in early 2002, noted that 50.5 percent of persons in the
United States have access to the Internet from their homes or from other
locations including community centers (US Department of Commerce,
2002). The same report found that 75 percent of 14–17-year-olds and 65
percent of 10–13-year-olds now use the internet, many from schools and
other public settings. Certainly, there is much to celebrate in this, and the
tone of the 2002 Commerce Department report is markedly positive
compared with that released two years earlier under the direction of the
previous federal administration (US Department of Commerce, 2000). 'A
Nation Online' expresses optimism that internet access will someday soon
reach the penetration levels of telephones and televisions, both of which are
found in more than 90 percent of US households.

Not all share the optimism of the US Department of Commerce,
however. Researchers at the Benton Foundation, the watchdog organization
specializing in raising awareness of communications policy initiatives in the
public interest, note that a large number of people from disadvantaged
backgrounds remain offline altogether. Only 1 out of 4 of the poorest
members of US society are online, compared with 8 out of 10 of those in
households earning more than US$75,000 a year (Wilhelm, 2002). This
group has further argued that overly optimistic reports of internet use serve
the politically important cause of justifying federal budget cuts. The report
'A Nation Online' was released to coincide with the release of the Bush
administration's FY (Fiscal Year) 2003 budget, which included a US$100
million cut that affects community technology grants and IT training
programs (Wilhelm, 2002). These cuts may disproportionately affect
disadvantaged groups, as a recent study found that 12 percent in the US can
log on to the internet *only* from work or from a public location such as a
library, school, or community center (Pew Internet and American Life,
2001; Wilhelm, 2002).

What is happening now, and may happen in the future, for community
technology programs is therefore an important subject for those involved in
the debate about whether or not the 'digital divide' remains an issue of
concern, and one worthy of funding priorities. Therefore the research
questions that frame this article are: (1) how have community technology
centers defined and attempted to address the needs of underserved

populations with regard to new media technologies? and (2) what are the policy implications that emerge as a result of these practices? I explored these questions using an approach consistent with critical/cultural media studies. The analysis builds upon a case study conducted at the US West Technology Center, a community technology center that provided computer and high speed internet access to underserved neighborhoods in Denver, Colorado. This study of a center with significant funding from the private sector takes on increased relevance in the consideration of whether or not non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in society, such as corporations and philanthropic organizations, might be able to fill in the expected gap that will come about with the shifts in federal funding priorities.

CRITICAL/CULTURAL STUDIES, POLICY, AND NEW MEDIA

'Policy Help Wanted: Willing and Able Media Culturalists Please Apply', reads a provocatively-titled article written by media theorist Dennis McQuail (1997). In this article, McQuail bemoans the fact that today, a large gulf seems to exist between media policymakers and those theorists undertaking critical/cultural studies approaches to the media. This was not always the case, he notes. McQuail points out that writers such as Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, and those associated with Birmingham University's Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies have long been concerned with notions of the 'good society' and the role of technology in relation to it. As he writes:

> [C]ulture and society are inescapably interconnected and . . . a 'good society' must entail a widely shared cultural life (a 'common culture') which should promote and support the vital and also the 'virtuous' aspect of the society. (1997: 44)

Yet how are the vital and virtuous, the 'social goods' of the society, to be defined and encouraged, particularly within policy debates? In the US, we tend to be nervous about definitions of the 'social good', as such discussions of virtue often dissolve into the rhetoric of sectarian group interests that tend to stifle rather than facilitate debate. Nevertheless, a cursory exploration of rhetoric surrounding new media technologies does reveal that there are at least two assumptions that undergird the relationship between new media and what our culture collectively presumes to be the 'social good' of access to computers and the internet: (1) it is believed that access to information technologies and the internet enables persons of lower income to develop skills that will translate to better-paying jobs, hence levelling the economic playing field; and (2) it is believed that access is an important way in which underserved communities, previously marginalized

by the current political process, might better participate in public culture and democracy.

Many of the current efforts on the part of social service agencies, NGOs, and related governmental programs have focused on the first, the economic, aspect of the 'social good' of computer access (see, for example the National Policy Association (NPA), and their conference, Crossing the Digital Divide to Digital Economic Opportunity: Upgrading Today's Workers for Tomorrow's IT Work).[1] The potential for increased civic engagement is often cited as an important secondary 'social good' of access to technology (US Department of Commerce, 2000, Bertelman Foundation, 2002). Among critical media theorists, greater emphasis has been placed upon this second understanding of the social good (Aufderheide, 1999; Golding and Murdock, 1989).

In contemporary policy debates, the assumed relationship between social good and the availability of new media technologies has undergirded both the current focus on universal service obligations, as well as the policies advocating that access to the technologies be made available in schools and in other public locations. While these policies move toward guaranteeing universal access to the technology, however, they do not address *how* such access is to result in the presumed goals of social good, particularly with regard to civic engagement. Even when access is secured, the fact that individuals are guaranteed the right of access to communication technologies does not mean that they have the necessary means to participate in the rational decision-making deemed central to democratic participation, defined as a social good in the work of both Hannah Arendt (1958) and Jurgen Habermas (1989).

With the increasing focus on making the Internet profitable for business and amenable for consumption practices, political participation, including the protections of one's own rights and the rights of others, is often at best an afterthought in policy discussions. The problem does not rest solely with the limits of the technology, of course. As T.H. Marshall suggested, citizenship 'is no longer simply about participation in the political process; it is also about the conditions that allow people to become full members of the society at every level' (1950: 182). As e-government expands, with online public services now extending to the updating of driver's licenses and the completing of applications for assistance, access to the internet becomes increasingly connected with the welfare state. This necessitates the definition of communication as not only a social good but a social *need*, as pointed out by Splichal et al. (1993).

In spite of increasing overlaps between social welfare and new communication technologies, in some ways welfare and communication policies seem to be moving in different directions. Welfare programs have been increasingly dismantled in the US, under the belief that, rather than

providing the opportunity to overcome economic barriers, welfare policy instead immobilizes people and undermines initiative. Thus, as Barbalet (1988) has noted, a prevalent assumption today is that in order to have a more effective market economy, welfare provisions must be limited. At the same time, we are experiencing a fourth 'rights revolution', as Calabrese and Burgelman (1999) term it. While earlier revolutions focused on the emergent rights of individuals, today's telecommunications policies are oriented toward preserving the rights of corporations and their owners as participants in the democratic process: these organizations have the 'right' to operate free from governmental restraint. This free reign is given to corporations ostensibly so that the marketplace can guarantee access to all through competition and, when that fails, through financial incentives designed to encourage provision of access to those areas that are less profitable (such as rural areas in particular).

McQuail (1997) acknowledges that due to the increased reliance on market forces as a purported regulator of the media, there is little reason for optimism that cultural theorists might play an influential role in policy formation. Nevertheless, he notes that it is the responsibility of media theorists to seek to enter the conversations of policy; 'unless one wants to just sit back and enjoy the postmodernist ride to nowhere in particular' (1997: 41).

Joining with the voices of those from the realms of critical theory and policy debate, therefore, this article employs ethnographic approaches and cultural analysis in an effort to better understand how current policies governing new communication technologies play themselves out in the lives of those imagined to be the recipients of the 'social good' of access to new media technologies.

METHOD

The research questions in this article were addressed by conducting what Marxist anthropologist Sherry Ortner (1993) has termed an 'issues ethnography'. An issues ethnography moves away from the 'whole culture' approach to ethnography that has been increasingly contested in media studies as well as among anthropologists and others. In its place, an issues ethnography attempts to shed light on specific conflicts and contested issues within a culture. The idea is that by exploring how a conflict plays itself out in a single location, we can come to better understand the assumptions that underlie the conflict, in particular as they relate to the interests of the parties that are primarily involved. As they foreground questions of 'who benefits and why', issues ethnographies are well-suited to critical/cultural media studies approaches to research. I believe that this type of ethnography can help us to better understand certain stalemates between policymaking

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and actual practice, and can perhaps point us toward important questions to be considered.

In the case of my research, the conflict that is the subject for investigation exists between (1) the widely-accepted goals behind programs that aim to close the 'digital divide', viewing computer access as a 'social good', or something crucial for participation in an emergent democracy; and (2) the actual practices at publicly-available centers such as that of US West Technology Center – practices that, I will argue, emerge as a result of existing policies governing new media. This article's case study demonstrates some of the pitfalls and contradictions of the current approaches so that we may consider important means for addressing the conflicts that then emerge.

My findings are largely based on the time I spent as a weekly volunteer at the US West Technology Center, referred to by its users as 'the Lab'. I logged 42 contact hours at the Lab in the summer of 2000, most of which were spent among young people who wished for assistance when using the Lab's 16 publicly-available computers. I also interviewed the Lab's director and associate director several times informally, and one time formally, using a semi-structured interview guide and tape recorder. I attended a press conference hosted by US West at the Lab, and situated my analysis in reference to both the publicly-available documentation about the Lab, and to public information about similar computer centers elsewhere in the US The US West Technology Center was a member of the Community Technology Centers' Network, a not-for-profit organization with approximately 500 members in the US and in western Europe. Although many of the centers in the Network received funding from federal sources, the majority of the US West Technology Center's funding had come from the US West Foundation and, to a much smaller extent, from philanthropic gifts, including those from the local community and from the national American Baptist organization.

While I had many interactions with the users of the US West Technology Center's Lab, I chose not to formally interview them when they came to the Lab, as that violated the reason for their attendance. This study, therefore, is based primarily on observation and analysis of public documents.

THE CASE: US WEST TECHNOLOGY CENTER

The US West Technology Center came into existence in 1995, when the US West Foundation donated 16 state-of-the-art computers to a social service center in one of Denver's disadvantaged communities. The initial donation from US West was built upon over the succeeding years, as Dell Computers made additional hardware contributions, US West installed DSL lines ensuring high-speed internet access, and matching funds from the US West Foundation were designated for the underwriting of two staff positions

for the US West Technology Center. Between 1995 and 2000, the Center was just one recipient of the US West Foundation's US$6 million effort which was aimed at ameliorating the digital divide.

The US West Technology Center was operated much like a public library on most days. Assistance was available upon request from the director or assistant director, each of whom had offices just off the large room where the public terminals were located. They were each technically adept and were called upon often to address the frequent problems that one would expect would emerge in such a highly-used facility. There were also many resources available in the Lab, both online and in the form of CD-roms, workbooks, and software instruction materials, for self-directed work.

During the summer months, the Lab was open each weekday and, for a time, for extended evening hours. Young people were the primary users of the Lab's facilities during the summer months. According to the Lab's directors, they were also the primary users during the after-school hours when school was in session. In the summer, elementary-school age children who attended a day camp program used the Lab each morning, while junior high- and high school-aged young people frequently dropped in during the afternoons. A few juvenile detention and homeless shelter groups brought young people from outside the center's neighborhood to use the computers for educational or work-training-related purposes.

RESULTS
The Lab and US West: social and corporate goals

One hot Monday morning in June, the US West Technology Center hosted a 'feelgood' news conference at the Lab to introduce their new and improved DSL (Digital Subscriber Line) service and their 'Online Avenue' application. Usually, the community center, where the Lab was located, bustled with activity. The center offered various social service programs to the lower-income neighborhood in which it was located, and on any given day one would find persons of all ages and of many racial/ethnic backgrounds who were participating in job retraining, High School Equivalency (GED) programs, youth employment programs, day-care programs, or seeking food stamps, clothing, or emergency utility help. Yet the demographics of those in attendance on the day of the US West news conference were remarkably different. Suddenly, the center was filled with people in expensive suits. In the hallway outside the Lab, where there were usually brochures about welfare-to-work programs and assistance for rent or day care, cloth-covered tables were filled with danish pastries, fresh fruit, coffee – and US West press packets. The US West people and their guests, many of whom were journalists specializing in high tech, loved being there. Many of the US West staff people seemed to feel comfortable, even felt a sense of ownership, about the Lab – even though few of them had ever

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been there before. Of course, this sense of ownership should not have been surprising, given the monetary and equipment contributions of their employer. Those contributions to the Lab were clearly successful in promoting positive feelings among the employees. Several commented on how wonderful it felt to 'give something back' to the community. As the news conference unfolded, it became clear that its purpose could be described as an instance of 'social marketing': those so-called 'win–win' arrangements that benefit both important social causes, such as in this case providing computer access to underserved communities, and the corporations that sponsor them, through the largely intangible benefits of positive press coverage and increased employee loyalty (Zikmund and D'Amico, 1989). The employees who attended the event seemed to feel increased loyalty to their employer.

Additionally, the timing of the news conference, and indeed of the corporation's largesse to the Lab, was also fairly intentional. Sol Trujillo, then-CEO of US West, was finalizing negotiations on the merger with QWEST at the time. Among other things, US West had complained that QWEST's board was almost exclusively white and male. At the news conference, US West announced that the applications introduced that day, along with improved DSL service, would be new contributions to the Lab, which was located in the mixed-race Five Points neighborhoods of Denver. US West therefore received positive press as a 'good corporate citizen', in support of diversity and opportunities for the underserved – while also getting coverage of new applications that would presumably increase the worth of the company in the eyes of shareholders and investors. Clearly, the internal and external public relations goals of social marketing were met for US West in the US West Technology Center.

The Lab and goals of the social good

'Social marketing' goals were not the explicitly-stated goals in the founding of the US West Technology Center, of course. Here is the official statement of the Lab's purpose, located in numerous US West news releases:

> The Lab is open for public access to allow people who don't own a computer, or are in transition, to set up email accounts, check email, update resumes, and perhaps just play a game or two.

The Lab provided underserved communities with computer access, a laudable program because of the presumed relationship between access and two often-cited goals of what may be termed the social good, as noted earlier: access enabling lower income persons to develop skills translating

to better-paying jobs; and as a way in which underserved communities might better participate in public life.

Unfortunately, there was very little in the way of programs at the US West Technology Center that sought to address this second goal. However, there were several programs at the Lab that sought to address the first social goal of using the technology for skills training and employment preparation. During approximately half of my visits to the Lab, for example, I found an adult seated at one of the computer terminals, preparing a resume. Twice, there were different adults using the internet to conduct a job search. In addition, the Lab's then-director had established an innovative 'computer recycling' program. The director offered hands-on classes in which people could come to the Lab and rebuild computers along with the Lab's volunteers. Upon completion of a rebuild and the donation of some volunteer time, the person could then take the newly refurbished computer home. The Lab also offered classes on various software applications, along with an introduction to the internet and to web design. Most of the classes and rebuilding seminars offered by the Lab were geared towards adults and related to the development of job-related skills, and some drew upon the expertise available among US West employees. Most of the classes, unfortunately, were rather poorly attended, which was a source of frustration for both the Lab's directors and the executive director of the community center that housed the Lab.

The classes oriented for young people fared somewhat better. In fact, as already noted, the Lab was most frequently populated with those aged 8–16. The Director once confided in me that he believed that if the funders of the Lab knew the way in which the Lab was most frequently used, they might be less enthused about funding it. Indeed, while access to the internet has been celebrated as a gateway to better jobs and perhaps a more informed citizenry in both telecommunications policy discussions and in US West news releases, what did most of its users want to do? Play games, download music, and check out celebrity sites.

As a relatively non-technical person, most of my time as a volunteer at the Lab was, in fact, spent helping teenagers and pre-teens figure out how to get to the gaming websites that they were hoping to find, or helping them to get to the games on the servers. This was, however, not an uncomplicated matter. The director had established a rule that no violent games were allowed on the Lab's computers. He felt it was important to uphold this rule to demonstrate the restraint on violence that he believed would be supported by the users' parents, as well as by the Lab's funders. The director felt that it was especially important to uphold this rule of 'no shoot 'em ups' in light of the social circumstances that the Lab's young users experienced, circumstances that he believed were very different from those of previous generations' upbringing:

> My generation, which is now two kids back from kids today, I realize we
> played cops and robbers and cowboys and Indians and World War II and all
> those things, but we also had . . . churches and schools to counterbalance those
> things, weighing in with values. So, if you don't have 'Thou shalt not kill'
> hammered into you, it is just the games. And there's plenty of other [games to
> play that are not violent]. It's not like there's nothing else you can do on a
> computer besides the 'shoot 'em up' or 'run 'em over,' and things like that.

The Lab's users were forbidden from playing violent games and were also admonished from using the computers to access pornographic sites. However, the latter was much less of a problem than gaming. The director and assistant director occasionally would check for its use on the machines using Netscape or Internet Explorer's history functions, but found little evidence that porn sites were a primary, or even more than an occasional, destination. The director was surprised, in fact, that pornography was not at all as much of an issue as he had anticipated when he began his job.

To discourage the playing of violent games, the director had purchased a number of educational games that were designed to improve math and reading skills.

> Some people would look at the [educational games] and then [say], 'Eh, back
> to Star Wars.' But most of the kids never had any interest in [educational games
> at all]. They just want to hear the songs, [and] see the babes at the WWF
> [Worldwide Wrestling Federation] site.

Despite the director's rule, *Grand Theft Auto IV* and *Quake III* were a few of the games that were loaded onto the computers many times over the summer. Neither of these games met the 'no guns' requirement. Placed onto the servers ostensibly 'before' the rule took effect, young people could not get into these games without a password. The then–assistant director, who saw things differently from the director, often subverted the director's wishes at the request of the young people and gave them access to the games when the director was not present.

The assistant director argued that games were a primary draw of the Lab, and thus he believed that those who chose to attend the Lab should have free access to whatever they preferred. Yet the director's position was more consistent with a recognition of the Lab as a public location that was designed to provide a safe space for young people. Part of that safety came from the young peoples' self-selection into a supervised environment. Because the young people themselves were making this choice, it seemed important to establish rules that could be clearly followed, and in particular rules that would be generally upheld by parents and other adult figures. Thus, it was not the possibility of 'negative effects' of the violent games that seemed problematic, but the possibility for an environment of unbounded entertainment. Whether or not media cause negative effects, many people

believe that they do (see, for example Seiter, 1999). Thus, to allow young people free reign seemed to go against the other rules that bounded behavior within the Lab. Thankfully, probably due to the self-selection at work among those who used the Lab, there were relatively few instances of behavioral misconduct that required sanctioning.

Not surprisingly, game-playing was the anticipated goal on the part of most of the Lab's young users. One day, I arrived before most of the regulars had shown up. I had been reading about a site on African-American history and pride that had been established by Henry Louis Gates of Harvard University, so I pulled the site up on several of the Lab's computers. It was an attractive site. After a while, one of the African-American boys who frequently used the Center sat down at one of the computers where the site was loaded. I pointed out the site, and told him that he could learn about African-American heroes and their history there. He glanced at the screen, and barely missing a beat, he said, 'Do you know how to get to the Nintendo website?' As other young people arrived, I watched what happened. None of them took any interest in the site either.

While the boys attended the center with more regularity than the girls (at least in my limited observations), girls more frequently seemed to come in groups. Sometimes they liked to draw or print out information on musical groups. One day, three girls between 9–11 years of age were seated at the computers. One shyly asked me if I knew how to get to the Barbie website. She had heard that you could dress up Barbie there, probably like the popular 'Barbie Fashion Designer' software. I pulled up the Barbie web site and spent the next three hours helping these African-American girls navigate it, changing Barbie's hair, eyes, and clothes, and printing out various outfits for coloring. This was not exactly the skill development the funders had in mind, I imagine.

However, perhaps, it was not as far removed from the Lab's goals as it might seem to be. During the US West news conference mentioned earlier, those who had developed the newly-available software applications, ostensibly for use by the Lab's patrons, were seated at the terminals where the Lab's more frequent young users usually sat. The developers were interested in talking with people about streaming video, interactive games, and online music programs that were available with the new applications. As their availability at the US West Technology Center had been touted as a means for 'improving skills training', I was curious as to how these developers viewed the connection between games and music downloading, and the development of computer skills. When I asked one of the US West software developers about this, however, she was visibly uncomfortable. Then, rather than relating a specific policy or vision of the company, she relied upon her own experience. 'Well,' she explained,

> I have an eight–year–old son at home. When he first got on the web, he was mostly interested in playing games or listening to music. But then after some time, he became interested in the computer itself. Now, he's interested in programming, rather than just playing, games. So I think that's what happens with the kids here. They'll get interested in using the applications, and that will then naturally lead to other things.

But how 'natural' is such a progression? The US West employee did not mention the fact that her son's experience with computers was no doubt shaped by the fact that there was a computer available in his home as opposed to a community center. She also did not note another key issue: she was herself a successful computer programmer. The 'natural' progression from entertainment uses to skills development certainly did not seem evident at the Lab, for the most part. A few young people had garnered significant skills in computer use as a result of concerted effort, and there were a few shining examples of young people who had earned some money with those skills as a result. But for the most part, the young computer users at the Lab were no closer to finding lucrative jobs, let alone becoming more involved in the political process, than they had been before they began going to the Lab.

In light of the goals of the social good of computer access and the expectations of policymakers dicussed earlier, this article has painted a rather depressing picture of observations at the US West Technology Center. Yet this is not to say that the Lab did not have value. Certainly, it was valued by those in the neighborhood where it was located. High demand for the use of the computers sometimes meant that young people had to wait for a turn, making the steps outside the community center an occasional ad hoc 'hang–out' location for would–be computer users and their friends. Even when they were forbidden from playing the games they most wanted to play, most young people did not leave the Lab but instead experimented with the web or, on rare occasions, even tried out the educational games. The Lab, therefore, fulfilled an important, if unstated, goal that also has connections to other definitions of social good. It served as a kind of high–tech YMCA, offering a location where young people could be together with their peers while opting out of a violent street culture. They found 'safe' entertainment, ironically, in the playing of violent computer games such as Quake or Grand Theft Auto, or games that subtly reinforced racist and sexist messages, such as Barbie.

DISCUSSION

Let us return to this article's initial research questions, which were: how do community service agencies define and attempt to address the needs of underserved populations with regard to new media technologies? And what are the policy implications of these practices?

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The US West Technology Center defined the needs of underserved populations as a problem of *access*. The US West Technology Center was able to address the problem of access primarily through the largesse of the US West Foundation, working in partnership with the community center that housed the Lab. The funding of this center was similar to many other community technology centers, in that most rely on a combination of sources that include private foundations (many of which are related to the telecommunications industry), government grants, religious or other not-for-profit organizations, and philanthropic individuals (See, for example, http:// www.ctcnet.org). With its strong identification with the US West corporate headquarters, the US West Technology Center was a model of what is possible with private/public partnerships.

But the story of the Lab also highlights the perils of these relationships. US West had benefitted from this partnership, as it had both increased loyalty and pride amongst its employees while providing a basis for positive news coverage, which was important as the company had been dogged by lawsuits and customer service complaints due to service problems. When US West merged with QWEST, the benefits to the corporation evaporated. And as a result, the US West Foundation, and its US$6 million support of efforts to close the digital divide, was discontinued. The new corporation was not held accountable for its role in continuing to meet the objectives of social good. No government agencies came to the aid of the Technology Center when its funds were at risk, either to apply pressure to QWEST or to contribute the needed additional funds to run the center. In part, this lack of initiative is related to the fact that digital divide debates in the Technology Center's home state had largely been defined in terms of a rural/urban divide, and hence funding and community activists had concentrated on connecting remote mountain locations rather than looking to the inner city's needs. Not even the press noted the loss to the Lab's neighborhood with QWEST's discontinued funding. In the midst of the more than 100 newpaper articles that were written about the US West–QWEST merger between the months of July and December of 2000 (the period from the first announcement of the discontinuation of the US West Foundation until its closure), only one article offered substantial coverage of this issue. In many ways, the QWEST pullout from the Lab probably did not seem very important. After all, US West and the Dell Corporation had already donated the hardware and the means by which community center users could access the internet. As with many similar efforts around the country, the organization funding the access never had much input into how the access would translate into economic or political benefits to prospective users, anyway.

Defining the digital divide as a problem of access is consistent with the definition offered in the Telecommunications Law of 1996. The Law, as

Robert McChesney (1996) has pointed out, emphasizes market incentives and technological capacities in the drive to establish access for all. But the emphasis on technological solutions leaves to the margins any other considerations, including those that would influence how the technology might actually be used to meet social goals. At the same time, community centers, like schools and libraries, are usually understaffed in IT support, and thus they struggle to keep the technology up and running, again making social goals secondary by default.

Yet the bridge between technological access and social good remains an important area of concern, mentioned in many analyses of the digital Divide that are made by both journalists and scholars (see, e.g. Carvin, 2001; Stepanek, 1999). Furthermore, many have articulated the common concern that the increasingly entertainment-oriented uses of the internet stand in the way of its potential for educational and civic use (Seiter, 2001; Shah et al., 2001). This is why the US West Technology Center's director hoped that the funders did not examine the actual use of the Center too closely: despite the claims for social good that were no doubt helpful in maintaining financial and public support for the US West Technology Center, the top three things that young people wanted to do with the computers included playing games, listening to and downloading music, and visiting the web sites of celebrities such as those from the World Wide Wrestling Federation. Not coincidentally, these are the top three uses of web pages, according to national surveys of all young people (Roberts et al., 1999). It is worth noting that the young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who came to the Center brought to their internet experiences the same preferences as their middle-class colleagues. The question, then, is this: why is it that we would expect young persons of disadvantaged backgrounds to use computers and internet access in a way that is markedly different from the uses preferred by young persons of privilege – particularly when these young users, like those funding this and similar centers, have no sense of how technological access will translate into better jobs or a political environment which is more responsive to their needs?

As suggested earlier, however, it is important to note that the primary users of the Center – namely, disadvantaged young people, as well as adults seeking job assistance or retraining – found great value in the Center's ability to provide a safe, high-tech haven for entertainment as well as for job preparation. The game-playing itself may or may not facilitate the development of job-related skills for the future workforce as suggested by the US West employee; indeed, this presumed relationship is an important question for future research. Nevertheless, I submit that the Center itself has the potential to encourage civic engagement, albeit not through the online means of information-seeking and discussion groups usually envisioned in conversations about the potential role of the internet in civic life.

One of the most promising forms of social good to emerge from the US West Technology Center was the fact that the Center itself served as what Oldenburg (1989) called a 'third place', or a 'core setting of informal public life', where young people from an impoverished neighborhood could gather informally outside of home, school, work, or commercial settings. Oldenburg (1989) and Sennett (1977) have each noted the lack of such public spaces in contemporary urban social life. Following this line of thought, Lieberg (1995) has pointed out that young people in particular have little access to public space that is not disciplined by organized associations or commercial activities. Thus, the lightly structured yet peer-oriented context of high-tech community centers provide an important location that draws young people together. Moreover, by sharing equipment and knowledge about how to use the technology, young people interact with acquaintances whose ages, racial/ethnic backgrounds, and gender differ from their own. Therefore, community technology centers have the potential to fulfil an especially important social good for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, as such locations provide a safe place for them to be and to interact with one another, and hence to develop a sense of the interests – political and otherwise – that they share with other members of their community.

Whether or not such informal interactions result in strengthened community ties is a subject of much recent debate. Researchers into civic life note that people participate in community-based problem resolution when they have a high degree of trust in others and when they participate in community activities (Almond and Verba, 1980; Putnam, 1995). This is why 'third places' of informal connections among acquaintances are believed to have important benefits for both individuals and society. The connections made in such locations are not only important for civic life, but also for the economic health of the society and its members. Sociologist Mark Granovetter (1974) has argued that 'weak ties', such as those fostered in informal meeting places, are what enable individuals to gain access to a potentially wider circle of resources and opportunities than they might otherwise have through their family or peer contacts. He notes that persons from disadvantaged communities tend to have fewer 'weak ties' than those from more affluent locations, making the need for such 'third places' as that of the US West Technology Center all the more important.

It is worth considering, therefore, how such technologically equipped 'third places' might foster community ties by building what Bourdieu (1984) has called 'social capital', or the networks of friends and acquaintances that enable young people to do such things as eventually find employment, locate housing, and otherwise function in society. In fact, several community technology centers intentionally engage in the kinds of activities that address this issue of social capital. For example, the tutoring and mentoring of

young people is a significant part of the programs at PUENTE (People United to Enrich the Neighborhood through Education), a community technology center that serves the low income Latino community of east Los Angeles. PUENTE draws funding from governmental as well as philanthropic sources, and serves as a stable organization in a troubled community. Other similar programs, primarily funded by private foundations, include PowerUP, CompuMentor, and iMentor, the latter of which pairs disadvantaged young people with adult mentors who share their professional interests (Kalman and Warner, 2001). These programs hold promise, as they directly relate the development of both computer skills and social capital to the interests and perceived needs of disadvantaged young people. A similar program is in place through the not-for-profit organization Libraries for the Future (McWhortor, 2001). This group works with libraries, schools and community centers to develop after-school and summer school programs, including effective and relevant training for adults working with youth. At the US West Technology Center (which became known as the Curtis Park Community Technology Center in 2000), the Lab's newest director similarly serves as a mentor to young people and a supervisor of various skills-based courses for both young and older persons.

Certainly, the 'third place' may have important instrumental goals, such as helping young people to develop the social capital and skills needed to eventually find employment. Yet there are also ways in which such technological 'third places' can foster political involvement in the sense that it secures the basic human rights of society's members. Schudson's (1998) theory of contemporary civic engagement is especially suggestive in this regard, as he argues for a model of political involvement that he calls 'monitorial citizenship'. This model, consistent with the legislative and juridical system in the US, emphasizes political advocacy and litigation as a means by which underserved groups may seek to attain rights such as those we associate with the social good. In Schudson's view, those interested in democratic participation should strive to become well-informed in particular, rather than in general, issues. He argues that people need to be informed enough in order to identify when a situation appears on the horizon that poses a danger to themselves or to the public good. Once such a threat has been identified, people need to have the resources, through trusted relationships, political parties, interest groups, and others who have access to policy decisions, to make their voices heard.

Schudson's model is suggestive of the kind of work that might be engaged to bridge the conflict between technological access and goals of the social good. Policymakers and advocates of the underserved might conceive of the work with community technology centers and other public locations where technological access is afforded, as a means by which the new communication technologies are employed to educate young people about

their own interests, and about how those interests are protected or threatened by current legal or juridical precedents and actions. In this approach, young people may be encouraged to learn to use the technology for the goals of skill and employment enhancement, but they may also learn to make connections between their own interests and the current political situation. Some of those who work with young people might need technical skills, therefore, but others, who are educated advocates for young, disadvantaged people, are equally necessary to young peoples' advancement and potential civic engagement. This second group needs to help young people to see that their interests include future career opportunities, but also to include attention to issues such as their right to have safe drinking water in their homes, or their right to have up-to-date textbooks in their schools. If we really see community technology centers and other locations where the technology is made accessible as locations for social change, we must provide both encouragement and financial support to those who work in these places to enable them less as technological educators and more as advocates and activists, people who can act as conduits, bringing their resources and hence social capital – whether from class, place, age, or experience – into the realm of resources available for young people.

This two-pronged system of skills-training education and community advocacy has become a centerpiece of many programs within the current Community Technology Center Network, and was in fact the focus of the 2002 Community Technology Center Annual Conference (see, for example 'Access and Beyond: Advancing a Community Technology Agenda,' http://www.ctcnet.org). These programs have brought opportunities for both future employment and increased participation among the often politically-alienated communities of disadvantaged neighborhoods. With the recent shifts in federal priorities, however, many now face the unfortunate prospect of shutting their doors.

Previous ethnographic research has suggested that non-users of computer and internet technologies are resistant to technology because they either see it as irrelevant to their occupational aspirations, they have doubts about their abilities to learn about computers, or they do not see themselves as the 'type' of people who use a computer (Stanley, 2001). Parents in disadvantaged families who do adopt computers into their homes often lack the skills necessary to use the machines effectively because their employment does not require use of computers (Bird and Jorgenson, 2001; Livingstone, 2001). Thus, both adults and children look to sources outside their home and work settings for help. Often, publicly funded schools serve as an important source of access for young people, but school-based online experiences are limited by time and machine availability. As repeated exposure and opportunities are necessary for people to develop skills and comfort with the technology, community technology centers, with their

locations in neighborhood settings and various structured and unstructured opportunities, play an important role in helping to overcome challenges of the digital divide.

CONCLUSION: POLICY IMPLICATIONS

There are two specific policy recommendations that grow out of this article. First is the importance of addressing issues of the digital divide that extend beyond access to the technology. I suggest that we consider how current and potential programs at community technology centers and other public locations might relate to the two presumed social goods of technological access: the development of information technology skills for employment, and the development of a 'monitorial citizenship' model that seeks to educate and advocate for the rights of disadvantaged persons, thereby addressing the desire for increased civic engagement. I have further suggested that we consider the possibility that community technology centers hold the potential for the development of social capital, and as such the motivation that brings people into the center (for example game-playing) may be less important than the connections between people that are fostered there. Thus, the internet's potential for increasing social capital and civic engagement may lie less in the technology itself, and more in public locations that enable its use among disadvantaged communities.

These suggestions for the redefinition and re-evaluation of the value of community technology centers hold potential for both how programs might be developed to meet the implied social goals of access-oriented programs, while also offering evaluative guidelines for organizations that fund such programs – including the federal government. A higher priority needs to be placed on adequate funding for community technology centers that are intentionally fostering social capital, participating in education and advocacy work, and providing the means for technological skill development. All are necessary for the functioning of individuals in a technological society.

The second policy implication addresses the 'fourth rights revolution' that has allowed telecommunications corporations to largely operate free from government restraint. After debacles such as the collapse of Enron, World Com, and Global Crossing and the alleged accounting improprieties of staff persons at QWEST itself, it is possible that public opinion may have shifted with regard to the doctrine of the regulation-free market as a necessity for competition and technological development.

It is especially interesting to consider the possibility of corporate accountability in light of the contemporary focus on accountability in public education and elsewhere in social policies. With the Leave No Child Behind Law of 2001, we have ever-more standardized tests designed to hold teachers, schools, and students accountable. Welfare-to-Work programs hold individuals accountable, demanding that those seeking funding must verify

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their efforts at employment-seeking. With the Telecommunications Law of 1996, communication policies now even hold service providers accountable for making access available. Yet corporations such as QWEST are able to elude accountability to the communities in which they are located. After 30 June 2000, the day that QWEST took over US West, QWEST reduced its charitable giving by US$6.5 million, and they made 11,000 workers redundant. One could argue that this was a cost-cutting measure, as the company's stock went down about 23 percent over the course of its first year of operation. Yet how, then, do we explain the fact that between 30 June 2000 and the spring of 2001, executives and directors at QWEST garnered more than US$328 million in stock options? Within the current climate of this and similar discrepancies between top-level pay and costs to lower-level employees and the community at large, lawmakers may find the public more willing to entertain initiatives in corporate accountability than ever before. It is worth noting that corporations such as QWEST stand to benefit both through positive public relations and the generation of new business as technology spreads among disadvantaged communities, which are currently experiencing the greatest proportion of growth. Thus, in light of government cutbacks, it seems more than reasonable to suggest that the e-rate (education rate, giving 20–60% discount on telecommunications services, internet access and internal connections to schools and libraries) be extended to cover community technology centers and other informational technology programs that will address the digital divide in ways that move beyond access.

As noted in the introduction to this article, the most immediate policy concern of the digital divide is that of the US$100 million cut to the federal funding that supports community technology centers and the technological opportunities programs. At the time of writing, federal tax cuts are still in the planning stages that will benefit those taxed at the highest levels – namely, society's wealthiest. Tax cuts are always popular during election years, yet the proposed federal tax cuts need to be seen as being in direct competition with public funds; in effect, the disadvantaged are paying for the tax cuts through cuts to the digital divide and other social programs. With public confidence in government at its highest level since 1966, it seems fair to raise the question of why we cannot revisit governmental involvement in programs assisting young people and disadvantaged communities during a time of economic downturn, and an increased sense of the importance of community-based co-operation. It remains important to exert pressure on federal agencies to recognize that the digital divide has not closed itself, and indeed will not do so on its own.

In conclusion, this article agrees with the many voices who suggest that the nature of the digital divide is not limited to who does and does not have access to *technology*: there was a social, political, racial, and economic

divide that existed before the internet and continues to structure the limitations in the digital divide. Yet most of us agree that access to the technology is, nevertheless, important. As this article has pointed out, however, there is a conflict between our social goals regarding the technology and the actual practices that take place as a result of our focus on access. Because of the focus on access and skill development, it has been possible for policymakers to overlook the potential benefits of community technology centers that may serve as a 'third place' where important opportunities for networking and awareness of basic human rights might be fostered. Recognition of these potential benefits of community technology centers should become a focal point for future policy discussions.

1 Information available at www.npa1.org; see also the Community Technology Centers' Network at www.ctcnet.org

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