Public Policy, Information Access, and Social Capital

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Views of Social Capital

• Collective Asset
• Individual Asset
• Fosters dense social networks, norms, and trust
• Resources to which individuals have access through their social relationships
• Signifier of power
Social Capital

• “Bowling Alone”
• But also much deeper…
Value of Social Capital

• Framework within which to understand the relationship between social structure and information access
• How communities affected by information access and information technology issues
• Used in many different Information Science contexts
Public Policy and Information

Wide range of laws and policies reducing access to information over past seven years:

– Homeland Security Act,
– USA PATRIOT Act,
– CIPA,
– Executives orders,
– Executive agency memos,
– And on and on…
Public Policy and Social Capital

Public policies that reduce social capital negatively impact the health of democratic discourse and participation within a society.
Habermas and Chatman

- Habermas explored the notion of the importance of the exchange of political information in the public sphere at the societal level.
- Chatman’s chronicled the importance of small worlds in exchange of information within the context of social groups.
Information Worlds

• Combining concepts of Chatman and Habermas can illuminate overall impacts of reductions on society, by combining macro and micro levels

• “Information Worlds” (Burnett & Jaeger) mels these two approaches into a single multi-leveled conceptualization of the interactions between social norms and values, information, and community, particularly in situations in which multiple worlds overlap
Information Worlds

Help to contextualize efforts to overcome gaps in information access created by these laws and policies

– Public sphere agencies, like public libraries, and
– Certain small worlds, such as scientists
Information Worlds and Social Capital

- Public policy working to reduce information access and exchange necessary to build social capital
- Certain social groups working to counteract loss of information access and exchange in order to build social capital
Information Worlds and Social Capital

In seeking to mitigate reductions in access to and exchange of information, these social groups generate social capital related to important political and social issues that might otherwise be lost as a result of public policy.
Research Needs

• This situation merits much greater attention than it receives in Information Science

• Social, professional, governmental, and research implications
Selected Related Works


• Burnett, G., Jaeger, P. T., & Thompson, K. M. (in press). The social aspects of information access: The viewpoint of normative theory of information behavior. *Library & Information Science Research.*


