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The Internet and Social Activism: Savage Inequalities Revisited

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The Internet and Social Activism: "Savage Inequalities" Revisited

by Dorothy A. Warner & John Buschman

The Internet will make us – maybe even has already made us – more free, more happy, and a more prosperous and democratic country. Simply put, these are the claims made on behalf of digitized networked information – claims that have been continuously asserted and advanced for close to thirty years now. It isn't hard to find prominent, curious, and even unintentionally humorous examples of this. For example, John Perry Barlow, co-founder of an electronic civil-rights group stated without irony that "we are in the middle of the most transforming technological event since the capture of fire. I used to think that it was just the biggest thing since Gutenberg, but now I think you have to go back..." (Young 1996). It's pretty clear that such breathless rhetoric – much of it coming from compliant media and sources like the magazine *Wired* – is simple hype, wishful thinking, and maybe more than a little self-promotion (Bradley 1997). For instance, Vice President Gore harkens all the way back to when the "transcontinental telegraph...transmitted Abraham Lincoln's election victory to California in real time." He notes that this "ability to communicate electronically has informed and shaped America [and] our new ways of communicating [and] will educate, promote democracy, and save lives." (Gore 1994).

Our concern in this paper is the claim made on behalf of the Internet in making democracy, that is to say citizen participation in democratic action and activism, more vigorous and responsive to the people. Activists writing from the political left have argued that "information technology has already been used to promote social change; that it can be a democratizing influence, and that it also carries intrinsic political implications." Examples are cited like the Chinese democracy movement's use of faxes, the use of e-mail during the attempted coup in the former Soviet Union, and the wider dissemination of database information and skills with the advent of public-use CD-ROMs in libraries" (Kagan 1992). One political

analyst states bluntly that "cyberspace defeats [regulation] handily [and this] is just the beginning of an inexorable trend that will likely become the greatest tool that democratic peoples have at their disposal in their aim to eliminate authoritarian governments" (Nielsen 1999). Finally, in the case of education (a topic of particular note to this paper), networked hyper-linked information is argued to empower students through their access to a wide range of research and contextual materials. At the same time, these networks carry with them the possibility of breaking down the educational hierarchy and democratizing education (Barnes 1996). We would like to step back from such high-flown language and predictions, and bring the issue to some direct and (thanks to the ever-lengthened Presidential election cycle) now timely issue of education funding and equity. The question this paper addresses is a simple one, a prosaic test of such claims as noted above. Does the Internet provide, free of charge, the ability to research a very local form of citizen action: legitimate comparative data on school or school district funding and finance? Further, is that data accessible and provided in a clear, sensible path? Our test of this is to follow up Jonathan Kozol's noted 1991 exposé *Savage Inequalities*.

Savage Inequalities and School Funding

In *Savage Inequalities*, Jonathan Kozol assesses the "progress" made since the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. In that decision the court found segregated education unconstitutional claiming that it was "inherently unequal." Kozol's investigation of public schools in the late 1980s found that even the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* standard, which *Brown* overturned, was not being met. Segregated institutions for black people were then accepted with the stipulation that the schools be "equal" to those available to whites. Kozol did not find truly integrated racial groups in schools and, within those segregated institutions, he discovered severe inequities. In the schools populated predominantly or exclusively by racial minorities he discovered appalling conditions. For instance, one history teacher in East St. Louis had 110 students in four classes and 26 textbooks – some of which were missing the first 100 pages. New Jersey had a statewide mandate for school librarians to have at least 6,000 volumes. One elementary school in a poor district had 300 volumes. One New York City school was built for 1,000 students but enrolled 1,550. Another New York City elementary school occupied an old roller rink.

Chicago suburban schools on average paid its teachers 50% more than those in the city. Dropout rates reached 58% in Camden, New Jersey, and among the 7,000 who graduated from the Detroit schools (out of 20,000 who began four years previously), it was estimated only 500 were ready for college level work. The single item Kozol found most striking was the disparity in expenditures, with no relationship to educational needs. Again in Illinois, the range of expenditure per pupil went from a low of \$2,100 per year in poor districts up to over \$10,000 per year in wealthy ones. Needless to say, Kozol found an embarrassment of riches simultaneous to this deprivation in the schools of Winnetka, Illinois, Rye, New York, and Princeton, New Jersey (Kozol 1991, 37, 167, 88, 69, 149, 198, 57). Schools were not only separate but clearly unequal.

A notable court case in New Jersey has supported the demand for equal education opportunity. The 1988 ruling by Judge Stephen L. Lefelt addressed the disparate results of locally-controlled school districts, recognizing "that students with similar abilities and needs should be treated substantially equally." He found that the evidence provided by the plaintiffs proved a violation of the New Jersey constitution's requirement that all students be provided with "an opportunity to compete fairly for a place in our society." Lefelt concluded that the educational rights outweighed the "defendant's local control, associational rights and efficiency justifications." He suggested that "if money is inadequate to improve education, the residents of poor districts should at least have an equal opportunity to be disappointed by its failure." His decision was affirmed two years later by the Supreme Court of New Jersey, yet attempts by Governor Jim Florio to transform school funding methods met with public opposition (167-169). States like New Jersey which had attempted to at least improve their schools' conditions had achieved little progress. The protections for local control of schools predominate, perpetuating an ever-widening gap between the haves and the have nots. Arguments defending this position rely on the accusation that funds are not used wisely in poorer districts and that increased funding is not the answer to their problems. Yet the resistance to diminishing funds for wealthier schools is simultaneously adamant. The most acute example of this "logic" is Proposition 13 in California in the late 1970's (220).

Perhaps most devastating, a 1973 U.S. Supreme Court decision denied

constitutional support for some equal education suits. The high court reversed a 1971 Texas federal district court decision which found Texas to be violating the equal protection clause of the U.S. Constitution through unequal educational opportunity. Justice Lewis Powell challenged the allegation that the constitution had been violated, writing that education "is not among the rights afforded explicit protection under our Federal Constitution." Powell went on to note that "the Equal Protection Clause does not require absolute equality..." (215, 219). The continuing evidence of inequality prompts presidents and presidential candidates to address the situation, not surprisingly with recommendations which can only continue the disparities. For example, John W. Donohue suggested that Kozol's "book be taken as seriously by President Bush, the U.S. Education Department and the governors of the 50 states as Michael Harrington's *The Other America* was said to have been taken by John F. Kennedy" (Donohue 1992). Bush's response was the Federal government's Goals 2000 initiative and a statement that money "isn't the best answer" and warned parents of poor children not to look to more spending as a "cure" (Kozol 205). In a recent *Washington Post* article, candidate George W. Bush, President Bush's son, "vowed...that his administration would strip federal funding from failing public schools 'that cheat poor children' and give the money to parents to pay for tutors or to help transfer their children to other schools, including private ones" (Booth 1999). The reality of such a promise is that the \$1500 which would actually be available to those parents would not go far in today's education market, but most regrettable would be the substantial financial drain on an already struggling school district. More separate. Even more unequal.

Before beginning our inquiry into free Internet-based school funding data sources, it is worth reviewing where Kozol's data came from in 1989-1990. Essentially, there were three primary sources. First and foremost, regional newspapers and newspaper series provided a backbone of information. For New Jersey and New York City schools, the *New York Times* was a prime source along with newspapers like the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Bergen Record*. In the case of the two Illinois schools, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and the *Chicago Tribune* provided much of the data along with regional papers. Occasionally national papers like the *Washington Post* or the *Boston Globe* investigated or reported on problems or notable successes outside of their immediate communities. The second prominent

source of information was interviews with students, teachers, and administrators at the location of the schools. The last prime source of data was governmental agency reports, memoranda, court decisions, and educational policy/advocacy group reports. This is the kind of routine information generated by agencies and policy groups which becomes part of the official record of bureaucratic enterprises like education. It is worth noting that certain schools or communities Kozol examined made national feature publications. Perhaps the most conspicuous examples were from Illinois. *Life* magazine featured East St. Louis in a story on race, and an article called "Let's Hear it for New Trier [High School]" featured wealthy Winnetka in *Town and Country* (Kozol 19, 65). In sum, Kozol's data research was very much akin to investigative reporting and journalism. He researched and compiled reported data, interviewed on-site, and gathered more factual information from governmental and policy agencies.

Internet Research and School Equity

We have picked six of the schools (two each in the same state) which Kozol profiled, visited, gathered data on, and wrote about in his book. They are: in Illinois, East St. Louis High School and New Trier High School in Winnetka; in New Jersey, Camden High School and Cherry Hill East High School; in New York City, P.S. 79 (in the North Bronx) and P.S. 24 (in Riverdale), both in District 10. For each of these schools, we chose to look for nine different kinds of statistic which Kozol consistently reported throughout all of his visits to dozens of schools. They are in two groups. The first group can be thought of as common statistical measurements of any school: class size, expenditure per year per pupil, dropout or graduation rate (if applicable), standard test scores like the SAT or statewide exams, attendance rates, and teacher salaries. The second group of measurements we think of as more qualitative in nature: size of the school's library or number of books per pupil, the number of computers or number of computers per pupil, and the ratio of guidance counselors to students (if applicable). It is important to note here that we were not looking for the exact same type of measurement across all three states. For instance, if schools could be compared by their average SAT score in one state vs. their average score on a statewide test (like those in New York for instance), that was perfectly acceptable — so long as the two schools could be compared. Also, statistical data gathering on education is a state matter.

So, the most reliable data are those compiled and published by the states and it is the only normed set of data by which to compare different schools. The universe of information available through Internet search engines was not our bailiwick since the data, unlike that generated for and published by the states, would be inconsistent. There may well be one or two or numerous wonderful individual or district or private websites available per school, or many articles on the schools published on the web, but statistically that leaves one comparing apples with oranges, so we had to rely on the only source of free, published data on the Internet from the state departments of education.

We should start out with perhaps the only good news. Such data, in varying forms of completeness, are available free on the Internet through state departments of education for all 50 states. The bad news is that the data is, frequently, radically incomplete. In the worst instance, in Illinois, only one of the nine pieces of data was available: comparative scores for math and verbal on the tenth grade Illinois Goal Assessment Program test. Not one other relevant piece of data was available. Not class size, not graduation rate, nothing. Comparing two elementary public schools in New York City was nearly as bad. Of the seven relevant pieces of data (graduation rate and guidance counselors didn't apply), only two meaningful ones were available. Spending per pupil was given citywide for both schools, so that was essentially useless. We could compare the two schools based on percentage of 3rd grade (our choice) math and verbal test scores which ranked at or above the state minimum score on New York State exams. Also, the percentage of total school days attended was reported for both schools. New Jersey, among the three states examined, easily had the most complete data. We could compare the two high schools in terms of class size, expenditure per pupil, dropout rate, standard test scores (the SATs — also including the percentage of students who took the test), attendance rate (available for multiple years), and median teacher salaries in the district. Not one state we looked at reported on library size or books per pupil, nor on computers, and for the high schools, available guidance counselors (Illinois 1998; New York 1999; Philadelphia 1999). This lack of data is perhaps even more startling when one realizes that this information is collected by all fifty states and reported, in composite form, to the Federal government. Every single item of the data we sought is reported, again in composite form, in *Digest of Education Statistics* and *State*

Indicators in Education. All of this information must be collected at the school district level at least. It simply is not made available.

The results of reviewing the accessibility of this data is not much better. Though both of the authors are librarians familiar with government agency web pages and the pitfalls of web resources and search engines, it would not have been a fair test to simply go directly to state department of education sites to review the data — much of which is not available. Rather, the search engine most recently reported to cover the highest percentage of web pages, Northern Light (Lawrence 1999), was used. Further, straightforward search terms were used: “New Jersey Education,” “New York Education Statistics,” and “Illinois Education Statistics” were the three searches. All were done on the same day (September 13, 1999). The results, again, were not encouraging. The first search for “New Jersey Education” was the most successful. On the first page of the search results, the sixth item noted a possible series of links, which led to a State of New Jersey link, then to the list of State Departments, then to the Department of Education, from which one had to choose a menu, then from the NJ DOE web site, the “Standards and Assessment” section. From the “Standards and Assessment” menu, one picked the “Schools” button, then “School Report Cards,” then the reports for Camden County (where Cherry Hill East and Camden High School are profiled — two of Kozol’s examples). In all, it takes twelve steps to get to the high schools’ report cards, if one guesses correctly and takes the most direct path from a successful search on a decent quality Internet search engine.

We will not take you through this excruciating level of detail for the other two searches because the results were dismal. The “New York Education Statistics” search had to be accessed via a Columbia University profile, which included, on a links banner, a link to a New York State Education Department site, which itself required another hyperlink. In all, it took eleven steps to get to the “School Districts Information” which was buried in tiny print — along with another five or six items in the corner of the web page. Unfortunately, every single one of the access points — alphabetical listings of all New York schools, schools sorted by county, and a hyperlinked state map — were not working that day. Nor were the listings available when checked one week later. The State of Illinois Department of Education web site simply could not be found with a web search. Six

different approaches (some through universities, some through other government agencies) were attempted with several pages of the results from inputting “Illinois Education Statistics.” None provided even a link to the State’s web page, let alone statistics. Instead, the authors relied on a handy web link to State Departments of Education discovered in the process of reference work. Even this direct approach proved utterly frustrating. Links under the headings of “School Finance,” “Quality Assurance,” “Assessment,” and “Standards” led nowhere. An internal search of the web site was attempted, and the third one (using simply “districts”) resulted in a link to a page not where the information is available, but where one can order the report by phone or e-mail! (Reports 1999) An earlier search had resulted in the small amount of statistical information gathered, downloaded from a zipped file, which requires either a sophisticated computer or knowledge of unzipping a file. Interestingly, over the course of working to find this and other school-specific data over the last year, one of the authors has had reason to call a couple of state departments of education to request data, or request access to data. The response has been frequently to question why it was needed and what it was to be used for on the part of the state agencies. Given how little substantive information is reported in these cases, and how inaccessible it is, this classic bureaucratic response seems to be replicated in digital form.

Conclusion

The authors came to this paper with very different expectations of what the results would be, but in the end we are both clear about the conclusions of our inquiry: data on local schools is very, very sketchy and its accessibility is terrible. Interestingly, revisiting Kozol’s schools in just this small way reinforced the need for just this kind of data to be available for citizen action. Ten years after Kozol, schools are still separate and still highly unequal. East St. Louis High School’s scores on the Illinois Goal Assessment Program tests for 10th graders in reading and math are less than half the scores of New Trier High School students. Only 56.5% of the third graders at P.S. 79 in the North Bronx performed at or above the New York State minimum on a reading test, while 92.2% did at P.S. 24 in Riverdale — in the same District 10 in New York City. The dropout rate at Camden High School is 11.5% (a particular kind of statistic Kozol finds frequently fudged and underreported), while Cherry Hill East’s dropout rate is 0.3%

(Illinois 1999; New York 1999; Philadelphia 1999).

It is not that the web is incapable of providing and making accessible such information. The State of Connecticut is a model. Its individual statistics for school districts provide six or seven of the pieces of data we looked for (depending on how one counted them), plus data on ethnicity of students, per capita income, percentage of non-native English speakers, and post-graduation activities of students. There is no need to read the runes with Connecticut's district reports to know the difference between the Greenwich and the Bridgeport schools (Strategia 1999). Clearly, the Internet can contribute to local citizen action. Right now, it doesn't. In sum, the vast and longstanding claims made on behalf of the Internet's contribution to democracy do not stand this simple test. School funding is an essential, local, and political matter in communities and states across the nation. The data is available and collected by the states, but it is unreported and buried on their web sites. Democratic citizen action in America will just have to struggle on without the web – as it has for 250 years.

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