

Combatting Information Poverty: Today's Ethical Challenge

Information poverty is an acute ethical problem in our society today, which must be overcome to provide all people with equitable opportunities and resources. In this talk, I will explain information poverty, describe three aspects of its composition and some ways we can challenge it. Scholars have described information poverty as “groups and individuals who do not have adequate and equal access to quality and quantity information” (Shen, 2013). In this state, people lack resources to know what they need to know. This covers a wide range of information, from knowledge about upcoming elections, to nutrition and medical information, to economic resources, to information about how to *find and access* the needed information. While there are many contributing factors to information poverty—more than can be covered in this talk—we can focus on three of the most pertinent: disinformation, the digital divide, and educational barriers.

Disinformation is a widely acknowledged, ever-growing problem today. Politicians and others promote misleading headlines, doctored photos, and fake videos, while both social media and mainstream media seem to have little recourse or power to stop the increasingly faster stream. Studies show that virtually all individuals are susceptible to “fake news,” though those with lower information literacy or less education—points we’ll address below—are more likely to fall victim.

The digital divide refers to differences in access, skills, and usage of information and communication technologies. Essentially, some people have more access to better technologies than others. As a result, they tend to develop stronger skills and use the technologies more effectively. These differences can be measured internationally as well as within a particular nation. As one might expect, the digital divide is often correlated to gaps in race/ethnicity, education, and socioeconomic status.

The third factor that plays a role in information poverty is educational barriers. These take many forms: students from poorer neighborhoods using decades-old textbooks; students from rural areas lacking broadband internet access; internet filters blocking access to useful information in schools; closure or reduction of school libraries; on and on. These sorts of actions harm students, reducing not only their access to information but their ability to know *how* to access it, evaluate it, incorporate it into their worldview, and share it with others. Educational barriers as they pertain to information have ripple effects.

Furthermore, it is important to note that all of these factors—disinformation, the digital divide, and educational barriers—tend to be concentrated in areas of high racial and ethnic diversity and low socioeconomic status. For example, a recent study found that only one-third of rural Californians had home internet access, leading to an “achievement gap” for students unable to complete their homework. The Pew Center reports that 44% of households with income under \$30,000 don’t have an internet connection, contributing to the digital divide. All of this adds up to create information poverty. People lack “adequate and equal access to information” which seems highly unethical and troubling in our contemporary age that’s so dependent on information access.

There are several ways to challenge information poverty, to fight back against it. First, we have to speak up about it: acknowledge the problem and amplify the voices of those who are working to combat information poverty in their own neighborhoods. This includes finding ways to respect and magnify localized ways of learning and sharing information. It also means

championing librarians and other information professionals who are on the front lines of this fight. Librarians try every day to push back against information poverty in many ways.

Second, we need to improve information literacy. This means helping people recognize good information, suspicious information, and false information, while respecting different points of view. There are objective criteria we can use to evaluate information, and more people should know how to use them.

Third, we can fight against the educational barriers that we encounter. When legislators or local school boards want to reduce the hours of school librarians, for example, argue for the importance of literacy and technological competency. When we hear about students using outdated textbooks, we need to clamor for investigation and restitution. In particular, we need to ensure that these educational barriers are not disproportionately affecting people of color or those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Information poverty has a compounding effect, making situations worse. We need to work with others, including those experience information poverty, to overcome this challenge.