

Steyaert, J. (1999). Technology fighting social exclusion (book review). *Computers in human services*, 16(1), 93-96.

## Technology fighting social exclusion

- Schön, Donald, Bish Sanyal, and William Mitchell (eds.). 1999. *High technology and low-income communities, prospects for the positive use of advanced information technology*. MIT press.

Here is an example of another advantage online publications can have. This collection of articles is the result of a colloquium in the spring of 1996 but it is only 2.5 years later that the fruits of this academic gathering become available. Beyond doubt, other elements beyond the efficiency of the publisher account for this development, such as the unfortunate death of the lead editor. But it is frustrating these precious insights and critical strategies to fight social exclusion were not available sooner. Fortunately, there is hope for the future as MIT press does seem to be experimenting with online publications, as can be seen on their site for the other book of William Mitchell on technology and the city, at [http://mitpress.mit.edu/e-books/City\\_of\\_Bits/](http://mitpress.mit.edu/e-books/City_of_Bits/)

Approach the book as you do a triptych: take in a first view of the whole, then focus on each of the three parts, then revisit the whole. The first part of the book explores how low-income communities will be affected by the changes surrounding the new information technologies. The second part of the book describes five initiatives using technology to benefit low-income urban communities while the third and final part of the book presents a synthesis.

### Part 1: technology and low-income communities

This first part of the book explores how low-income communities are affected by the emerging information society and contains contributions by Manuel Castells, Peter Hall, Julian Wolpert, William Mitchell and Leo Marx. Although some of the sections (e.g. the discussion on telework on pages 52 and following, or references to Britain's Prime Minister Thatcher on page 63) give the impression of being outdated, none of the arguments has lost strength and are still very much true. A change of Prime Minister or increase in bandwidth doesn't have such rapid influence on dynamics of society.

Across the five contributions of this section, commonalities include the importance given to education, both as a factor inducing inequalities and a strategy to reduce them. This already indicates that this is not a book trying to go along with all the latest hypes or suggest high-tech quick fixes for societal problems. The analysis provides goes way beyond that and leaves one wondering how many years or decades it might take before any strategy targeting low-income communities might show some result.

### Part 2: strategies

The second part of the book provides ten accounts of strategies that reduce social inequality by embracing information and communication technology. Being more descriptive, they show being more vulnerable to changing technology than the analysis of the earlier part of the book. The contributions are sub-divided in sections entitled 'question of access', 'governance and advanced information technology', 'entrepreneurial potential', 'the educational computer' and the 'community computer'.

The latter section is less grounded the analyses in the first parts of the book as it centres on social cohesion rather than social exclusion. An interesting debate is opened on the national versus neighbourhood information infrastructure but unfortunately gets tangled up by mixing the concepts of 'community' and 'neighbourhood'. A discussion on how virtual communities interact with real communities and with locality would now be more in place and welcome.

### **Part 3: synthesis**

The final part of the book consists of a single concluding chapter. It opens with the telling phrase: "there are no technological fixes for America's inner-city problems; social engineering has its limits, policy outcomes rarely, if ever, match policy objectives and policies are rarely crafted neutrally by the dictum of so-called public interest." Those who are looking for quick solutions have been warned. However, those able to suppress their urge and taking the time to read through the book will find it provides new energy and ideas for their own thinking.

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