

Universal Access in IHAC and NIAC: Transformed Narrative and Meaning in Information Policy

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The diffusion and adoption of new information and communication technologies have prompted the re-evaluation of long-standing policy issues relating to access to information. Those issues have a past, present, and future (Parsons, 1995, pp. 140-41) (i.e., a beginning, middle, and end); they define, reside in, and are most securely interpretable within a documentary (Smith, 1974) narrative structure (Kaplan, 1993). Such documentary evidence is also the first place we can identify change over time (Sabatier, 1993). Crucial questions in attempting to interpret the meaning and effect of Universal Service and Universal Access are whether they have been treated differently by policy-makers; or whether a satisfactory “end” to the policy narrative can be achieved; and whether a satisfactory definition has ever informed information/communication policy. The ways these issues are explored and the theoretical perspectives that can be applied are potentially significant in observing and analysing change in policy and changes in how we learn, or do not learn, from policy.

It is necessary to consider definitions of the terms Universality; Universal Service, and Universal Access in order to discuss the rationale for a National Information Infrastructure. Universality has been defined as the distribution of social benefits “without reference to income, means or needs, however defined, and whether taxed or not” (Seldon and Hamish, 1967, p. 13). The concept is founded on the principle that citizens

with different means should have equal opportunity to develop as individuals and participate fully in society; it is believed that the skills and successes developed through equal access will benefit the individual person and society at large. As such, universality is a means for equitable distribution of a “public good.” Today, however, ideals of universality and public goods are being challenged by those promoting privatization and commodification of information and, more generally, a liberalized market ideology. The problem is intensified by technologies suited to accommodate changing attitudes to the value of information.

Universality is challenged further by globalization, commodification, and subsidiarity, or downloading. Governments and policy makers in numerous countries are adopting new information and communication technology as a way to adapt quickly to what is perceived to be inevitable – globalized markets (Gray, 1998; Hill, 1994; Rowlands, 1997). For countries with a strong tradition of universal social programs such economic restructuring is posing serious and eminently predictable problems. The diversion of government and market interests from local, regional, and national interest to the global market is putting already challenged individuals and social groups into even more vulnerable social roles as the possibility of gaining – and sustaining – access to information is diminished.