

# Information Inequality, Information Gap, and Library Information Service\*

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## 1. Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to welcome you to the WLIS 2006, Seoul.

I feel especially more rewarded and excited to be with you this morning because I have put lots of time and effort into making the WLIS Seoul Conference possible during my service as a president to the Korean Library Association.

As you know, IFLA Conference is an international gathering of information professionals coming from almost 150 countries every year, exchanging newly developed scholarly information and technologies and sharing new experiences in the field of library & information science. Since we meet every year in different cities of different countries, I believe we have been able to build a stronger relationship than those of other international organizations.

We remember our participants' happy faces; we remember wonderful experiences of a unique culture of different countries ; we keep in touch with old and new friends.

I would say we are all members of one family.

The topic I'd like to discuss this morning is the "information gap." I believe it is something information professionals must be concerned about and it is also our job as information service professionals to seek for the way of solving the problems.

To help understand the fundamental problems of the information gap, I would like to discuss different types of information gaps, and indicate several problems of what governments and libraries have done to solve 'information gap' and the strategic goals they have worked on.

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## 2. Information inequality, information gap, library information services

The information society we live in today provides us with an abundance of information, fast information access with inexpensive and user-friendly technologies, and effective information transformation technologies. We see that the amount of information is increasing geometrically and we can easily find the way to access those information through cyberspace. But, unfortunately we see the antinomic social structure of both 'information rich group' and 'information poor group' exist together in this information society. The information society is substantially founded on the market economy. The information society makes a large scale of information production possible, yet the society has been accompanied with an unequal information distribution. To acquire the needed information available through information networks and understand the contents to utilize the information, individuals or organizations must have the ability to handle new technologies, the economic ability to purchase IT equipments and information services, and the cultural ability of information reception. However, the problem that has appeared in the society is that such abilities are not equally distributed and such unequal distribution of abilities creates an 'information gap.' Thus, the 'information inequality' can be explained as a result of information access opportunity gap, information utilization ability gap, information reception ability gap, and the difference of one's information mind.

It is our philosophy of all libraries that information access and opportunity should be provided equally to all people. It is clearly stated in IFLA declaration.

"IFLA and libraries and information services share the common vision of an Information Society for all adopted by the World Summit on the Information Society in Geneva in November 2003. That vision promotes an inclusive society in which everyone can create, access, use and share information and knowledge and it is based on the fundamental right of human beings to both access and express information without restriction. ... IFLA and its members are committed to addressing the digital divide and the information inequality."

Article I of the American Library Association Code also states:

"We provide the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organized resources; equitable service policies; equitable access; and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests."

If information access and utility should be provided equally to various levels of social groups, then the problem of information gap becomes a serious issue of human rights. For example, we see those people who are handicapped, low income or aged are in reality being

information-alienated or vulnerable from the information society.

### 3. Types of Information Gap

It has been believed that information gap is fundamentally caused by social economics such as information machinery usage and access. But lately, the core issue of information gap has been concentrating more on “who utilizes the information most correctly” or “what is the attitude toward the information itself ” rather than “who can access the information media more easily” or “who can acquire more information.” It means that the disputed point of information gap has evolved from the view point of ‘general access’ to that of an individual’s ‘subjective possession of information.’

The changes of core issue of information gap have made it possible to divide the concept of information gap into 3 types, ‘information access gap’, ‘information utilization gap,’ and ‘information reception gap’. ‘Information access’ defines the economical condition in accessing new information technologies; ‘information utilization’ defines the technological and social conditions in acquiring, processing, and managing information; and ‘information reception’ defines the process of information reception that makes one’s life more intellectual and upgrade values of one’s life.

Following is a graph that shows the characteristics of each types of information gap.

<Graph 1> Characteristics of Information Gap by types<sup>1)</sup>

	infor. access(type 1)	infor. utilization(type 2)	infor. reception(type 3)
characteristics of gap	opportunity gap	utilization gap	reception gap
elements of gap	infor. access	infor. utilization	infor. possession
main resources	economical	social	cultural
level of knowledge	quantity of knowledge	width of knowledge	depth of knowledge
forms of knowledge	simple	practical	cultural
characteristics of vulnerability	computer illiteracy	net illiteracy	cultural illiteracy
characteristics of users	skillful operator	versatile user	matured netizen
method of learning	training	experiencing	self-reflection
improvement area	hardware	software	humanware

1) Kim, MoonJo and Kim JongGil, Digital divide: conceptual and practical implications, 2000. (KRF2000-044-C00077)

In the first type of information gap as shown in graph 1, the characteristics of gap can be called 'opportunity gap' because the access opportunity is the key point in the 'high-low' separation. The vulnerability to computer is called, 'computer illiteracy.' The access opportunity can be obtained by having economic power to buy information machineries. The user would be a skillful operator and such skillful operation can be achieved through training.

In the second type of information gap, the versatile use of information is the key point in the 'high-low' separation. Thus, it can be called, 'utilization gap.' To widen the use of information, not only is access opportunity required but also various human and material relationships must be acquired. In other words, the emphasis should be placed on the 'social information gap' rather than simply on the 'access gap.' The user group in the second type would be a 'versatile user' laying weight not only on the 'quantity of knowledge' but also on the 'width of knowledge.' Learning through field experience is required for versatile users to elevate their information handling ability.

In the third type of information gap, the problem is mainly the matter of individual's 'subjective possession of information,' which requires a depth of knowledge. Non-economic factors such as cultural resources and psychological demand have significant influences on the third type of information gap. Vulnerability of the third type is called 'cultural illiteracy.'

#### 4. The problems of solution for information gap

Effort in finding the cause of information gap and its solutions have been made in various levels, but the results of such efforts have been unsatisfactory.

Now I'd like to address some of the problems in their efforts.

##### 4.1 Conceptual problem in defining information gap

The information gap is mostly defined as a gap between 'those who have information' and 'those who have not.' The cause of information gap has been generally understood as an access problem, so they believe, it could easily be solved by technology. In the OECD's definition of information gap, it also states that "the difference in access opportunity of information communication technology and internet usage under equal social economy between individuals, families, companies, and areas."

We can see such a definition is concentrating on the technological problem rather than defining the problem itself. In other words, we find no mention of other important elements such as information utilization gap and reception gap.

#### 4.2 Problem of government's study approach

Government has put much efforts into solving the information gap. But we find that their approach has not yet moved away from concentrating on demographic or social-economic variables affecting the information gap. The policy reports mostly include such variables as the level of education, income level, internet link, user distribution, and numbers of internet users, etc. The approaches of those studies are very much instrumental. In other words, the studies have neglected the social structural approach and the social cultural values of the information alienated group.

#### 4.3 Problem of government policies

Government seems to believe that the information gap can be reduced by expanding internet access and use opportunity. It seems the ideas of expanding physical opportunity by supplying computers and expanding internet use can be a 'necessary conditions,' but they cannot be a 'sufficient conditions' for total solution.

What is important is that government must provide more meticulous and careful consideration for social conditions and cultural values of information neglected people. Also, government must support information alienated people by providing necessary information that can help improve their quality of life.

#### 4.4 Problem of solution by technology equality

It is believed the development of new technology has escalated information gap. However, there is an assertion that once the new technology is widely used, technology itself would rather help reducing information gap. For example, if the price of computer becomes extremely inexpensive, all people could easily buy computer equipments and enjoy the benefits of information. So, the 'technology equality' could be a target for solution of gap.

Nevertheless, there is another assertion that when new technology is developed and the use

of new technology expanded, another level of information gap will occur accordingly before the existing problems are solved.

I personally agree with the second assertion. The solution by technology equality cannot be the ultimate solution of the information gap.

#### 4.5 Problem of solution basing on the statistical data

The methodology of many studies on the information gap has shown a tendency of depending on metrical scale and the findings of the study are also addressed by presenting the comparative reduction of statistical value.

Variables such as computer supply rates, sex, age, education, and income, etc. are all measurable, but the statistical values of such variables have the evident limits in grouping them by social, economic and cultural structures that have mixed influences over the social inequality and the cause of information gap.

#### 4.6 Problem of strategic targets of solution

Having examined the previous strategic targets to solve information gap, we find that the earliest target was to expand the computer supply. The next target was to develop new softwares and application supplies, and more recently, information inequality has become an important issue.

In the beginning, possession of computer was thought to be the best measure of information gap. However, it has proved that the possession of computer cannot be the only solution of information gap. The next strategic goal was to expand the information infrastructure in order to make everyone possible to access online networks.

Yet, online network access has turned out to be just a beginning of another problem. For example, if one does not have an ability to use the internet or one lacks in knowledge of effective use of internet or navigation, one cannot enjoy the benefits of new communication technology. If one finds himself limited in understanding the contents, then he no longer enjoys the benefits of information power.

The contents limits include problems of language difference, race difference, regional and cultural difference. A typical example of language problem is that approximately, 68.4% of internet sites are in English, thus users residing in non-English speaking countries, or users

who do not understand English, are having difficulties in understanding the contents. We also find that most internet sites provide a plentiful and detailed information or contents relating to the developed countries or big cities. But we find that the information or contents relating to many underdeveloped countries, minorities, and small agricultural cities are extremely limited.

## 5. Conclusion

I believe that the problem of information gap caused by information inequality is a significant issue to be handled by information professionals who are responsible for providing effective information services to all people.

In order to find a solution of the gap, it is necessary to understand different types and conceptual characteristics of information gap. Types of information gap can be characterized by 'information access gap,' 'information utilization gap,' and 'information reception gap'.

We all know that many libraries have put lots of time and effort into solving the problems of the information gap by acquiring computers and other information machineries; developing new search engines; resource sharing; constructing networks to expand online use; unbiased collection development; and expanding information access opportunities to information neglected or vulnerable people.

However, what I'd like to emphasize is that the libraries of today need to reinforce every possible effort to promote 'information utilization' by making users a 'versatile user.' Furthermore, libraries must place more significance on the part of information reception process - 'the subjective possession of information.' I mean non-economic factors such as user's information mind, values, cultural and psychological demand must be taken into account when considering the solution of information gap.

Thank you.

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