

Book Review: Digital Cities: The Internet and the Geography of Opportunity

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*In an age when the United Nations has declared access to the Internet a human right, and universal access to high-speed broadband is a goal for many countries, urban areas have been largely ignored by federal policy. The cost of that neglect may well be the failure to realise the social benefits of broadband and a broadly-connected digital society, argue the authors of **Digital Cities**. Using multilevel statistical models, the authors present new data ranking broadband access and use in the USA's 50 largest cities, showing considerable variation across places. Reviewed by **Zachary Spicer**.*



Digital Cities: The Internet and the Geography of Opportunity. Karen Mossberger, Caroline J. Tolbert and William W. Franko. Oxford University Press. January 2013.

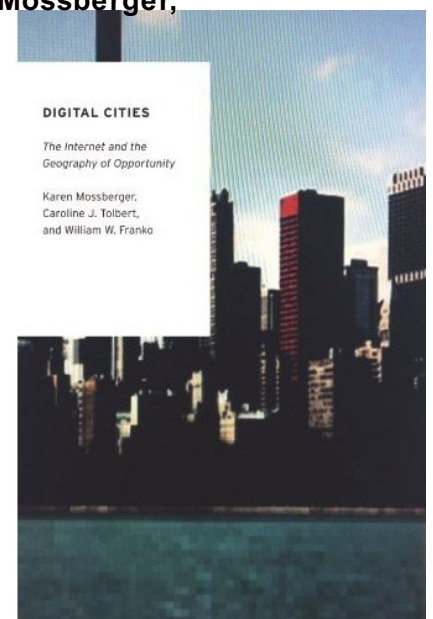
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Many of us take access to the Internet for granted. We use the Internet in daily life at home, work and school. To many, the Internet is both a tool that connects us with other users, vast sums of information and entertainment. It is rare that we consider life without regular access to the Internet, but in *Digital Cities: The Internet and the Geography of Opportunity*, [Karen Mossberger](#), [Caroline J. Tolbert](#) and [William W. Franko](#) ask us to do just that.

Mossberger, Tolbert and Franko are concerned with the extent to which individuals have acquired the capacity to use technology, which they refer to as “digital citizenship”. The Internet, they contend, is a communication tool that rivals the printing press in importance, having the capacity to promote information and knowledge exchange and advance public education. Unequal distribution and access, however, is holding back the advancement of this tool. As such, governments and citizens alike should be concerned about the uneven nature of access to broadband Internet.

“Digital citizenship” requires regular and effective access and use, which suggests multiple needs: access to the Internet, access to hardware and software, the skills to use technology and critical thinking skills needed to evaluate and utilize information online. As the authors demonstrate, America is falling short in these areas and, as a result, information inequities are developing that could have deep and lasting impacts on the social fabric of the country.

The focus on cities is deliberate. As the authors argue, cities are important for national broadband policy because urban areas are uniquely positioned for producing broadband’s social and economic benefits. The density inherent in urban areas enhances the impact of broadband use, creating a situation where urban residents can be both producers and users of information. Additionally, the authors acknowledge that many cities in the United States experience high rates of social stratification. Lower income earners stand to benefit the most from the Internet, but are more likely to have inadequate access. In our cities, then, the authors see both opportunity and a corrective to inequity.



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The main purpose of *Digital Cities* is to identify a policy problem and provide a solution. These tasks are accomplished primarily in two chapters: Chapter 3 – “Place and Inequality: Urban, Suburban and Rural America” – which addresses the state of broadband access in America and Chapter 9 – “From Neighbourhoods to Washington” – which provides solutions to correct America’s information divide.

The third chapter of *Digital Cities* is particularly illuminating. The authors utilize an extensive amount of survey data to show where America’s broadband policy is failing its citizens. The authors find that only 65% of Americans in 2010 had the required access to qualify as digital citizens. As such, more than one-third of America is still offline or has limited technological access. To the authors, this is a troubling statistic. They find that those who have limited experience online are less likely to possess the skills they need to find information and use technology and are less likely to use the Internet for a broad range of activities, such as information seeking that enhance individual opportunity in areas like jobs, health, education and political participation.

When delving deeper into the survey results in Chapter 3, Mossberger, Tolbert and Franko find much more startling results, namely that racial and ethnic minorities significantly lag behind white non-Hispanics in Internet use. On the whole, one in two American minorities is off-line or less connected. The authors also find that suburban residents are the most connected, as compared to their rural and urban counterparts. This trend continues when examining income. The probability of access to the Internet rises significantly with increased income from a low of 35% for the poorest Americans who live in rural areas to a high of almost 85% for the wealthiest citizens who live in the suburbs.

The solutions to bridge this divide come in Chapter 9. Mossberger, Tolbert and Franko state very early on that access to high-speed Internet service involves two components: 1) availability of infrastructure and service and 2) individual adoption of the technology. Solutions inevitably flow from this conceptualization. The authors argue that simple investment in infrastructure will not entirely solve the problem. On the contrary, this would most likely benefit those who are already better off or more Internet savvy. The solution is a mix of infrastructure investment and programs in information immersion.

The solutions are inevitably complex, but need to be tailored to local environments. Information inequities, the authors argue, follow societal inequities. Investments in poor neighbourhoods need to be targeted in two ways, namely addressing both the cost of broadband Internet and fostering the skills that residents require to participate online. The means to achieve these two goals will vary, leaving the authors to argue that public policies must be responsive to different needs and neighbourhood contexts. Cities can’t accomplish this task alone. Federal and state governments, along with private sector investment, are needed to bridge the digital divide that is present in America’s urban centre.

Taken as a whole, Mossberger, Tolbert and Franko’s argument is persuasive and poignant. They have identified a policy concern that has largely gone unnoticed. In the process, they have also identified a dimension to the solution that is also continually overlooked: education in digital citizenship. Given the vast sums of money and political will it will take to address the problem of information inequity, it may be many years before policy makers make a sincere effort address the digital divide, but Mossberger, Tolbert and Franko have made an admirable contribution towards identifying one more source of the growing inequality within America’s cities.

Zachary Spicer is a PhD Candidate at The University of Western Ontario, where he studies local government and Canadian politics. His research has appeared in *Canadian Public Administration*, the *Journal of Canadian Studies*, the *Journal of Legislative Studies* and the *Canadian Journal of Urban Research*. You can follow him on twitter at [@ZacSpicer](https://twitter.com/ZacSpicer). [Read more reviews by Zachary](#).