Information Poverty and Political Inequality: Citizenship in the Age of Privatized Communications

by Graham Murdock and Peter Golding

"Where material inequality massively differentiates people's access to goods and services, and those goods and services are themselves a necessary resource for citizenship, then political rights are the victim of the vicissitudes of the marketplace and its inegalitarian structure."

The new market-oriented communications and information system that is currently gaining ground within liberal democracies is being sold to the general public on the promise that it will enlarge people's choices and increase their control over their lives, that it will be both liberating and empowering. This emerging order is the product of two major processes: technological innovation and convergence, and "privatization." The first is creating a range of new kinds of communications and information services and restructuring established media industries; the second is providing the essential social and ideological context in which these changes are being developed and promoted.

"Privatization," with which we are primarily concerned in this article, operates on two main levels. Economically it involves moving the production and provision of communications and information services from the public sector to the market, both by transferring ownership of key facilities to private investors and by making success in the marketplace the major criterion for judging the performance of all communications and information organizations (including those that remain in the public sector). This reconstitution of production is accompanied by a parallel restructuring of consumption. First, nonwork activity becomes ever more securely rooted in the home. Second, the new market-oriented system of provision addresses people predominantly through their identity as consumers, both of the communications and information products they buy and of the products promoted in the expanded advertising system that finances many of the new services. In the process, the system marginalizes or displaces other identities, in particular the identity of citizen.

Although a number of commentators have attacked the "privatization" of communications and information services and challenged the claim that the...
new communications technologies are, in Ithiel de Sola Pool's phrase, "technologies of freedom," very few have linked these critiques to current debates on the nature of citizenship in complex democracies or asked what role communications plays in sustaining and extending it. Taking contemporary Britain as a particular case of a liberal democracy in the process of change, this article discusses the connections between the organization of communications and information facilities and the constitution of citizenship, arguing two basic points. First, we draw attention to debates on the nature of citizenship in political sociology and political philosophy that assign a central and complex role to communications, debates that media researchers need to explore both conceptually and empirically. We then go on to demonstrate that policies in the areas of communications, taxation, and welfare being pursued by the Thatcher administrations in Britain, and in varying degrees by a number of other liberal democratic governments, are combining to comprehensively undermine the resources required for full and effective citizenship.

We begin with a brief exploration of current debates on the nature of citizenship. The starting point for most modern discussions in this area is T. H. Marshall's essay, *Citizenship and Social Class*, written in 1949 (17). Marshall distinguishes three basic dimensions of citizenship—civil, political, and social—and traces the development of the rights associated with them together with the institutions that promote and guarantee them.

Civil rights are centrally concerned with an individual's freedom of action within the sphere of "civil society." They include freedom of speech, freedom of thought and religion, freedom of movement and association, and, centrally,
the freedom to own and dispose of property. Property rights are assigned a pivotal role in classical liberal theory as the major guarantor of individual choice. In this conception the market is unambiguously the sphere of liberty that the state threatens to erode whenever it goes beyond its assigned “nightwatchman” role of regulating the use of force and overseeing the legal system that guarantees individual rights. In the words of British Home Secretary Douglas Hurd, for Conservatives “private property is the natural bulwark of liberty” (13).

The second set of rights, political rights, is concerned with the conditions under which people participate in the exercise of political power—by holding public office, electing members of the national and local bodies that formulate policies and pass laws, and involving themselves in the exercise of those laws through jury membership. The image of the citizen as a participant in the political process is of course at the center of the classical conceptions dating back to ancient Greece. It is what separates citizens from subjects. The latter may have the right to protection under the law, but only citizens can take part in determining the nature of the laws by which they will consent to be governed (33).

Marshall sees the third set of citizenship rights, social rights, as the distinctive product of the twentieth century. His presentation of them centers on the struggle to secure a basic standard of life and well-being for all through the institutionalization of the welfare state. For our purposes, however, we need to add the rights of universal access to communications and information facilities, which emerged at the same time and were underwritten by public provision funded out of local and national taxes and institutionalized through the organizations responsible for continuing education, public libraries, and, later, public broadcasting. Although Marshall does not stress the importance of communications rights, they are presupposed by his general definition of the social rights of citizenship, which cover “the whole range from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilised being according to the standards prevailing in the society” (17, p. 11). This definition involves a substantial widening of the traditional conception of citizenship. It is no longer simply about participation in the political process; it is also about the conditions that allow people to become full members of the society at every level (15).

Although Marshall’s schema has done much to advance and broaden the discussion of citizenship, it is open to a number of criticisms. Conceptually, he presents the three dimensions of citizenship as a simple list without arranging them in order of priority. Yet it is clear from the overall thrust of his argument that he sees social rights as the essential precondition for the meaningful exercise both of political participation and of full social membership. Or, put another way, poverty is a powerful mechanism for excluding people from these entitlements (7).

Marshall was writing in 1949, after the Labour Government elected in 1945 had pushed through the reforms that completed the creation of the modern British welfare state, and he had good reason to think that this restructuring...
was an irreversible step toward securing the basic resources for citizenship.
 Forty years later, with the experience of a decade of radical conservative admin-
istrations headed by Thatcher to assimilate, it is clear that this optimism was
premature and that these resources have been progressively eroded in ways
that we shall detail presently.

With the benefit of hindsight it is also clear that Marshall's argument suffers
from a somewhat uncritical definition of the "social heritage" that provides the
cultural and psychological glue binding citizens together in common member-
ship of the society. Part of the problem is that the development of citizenship
in its present form has been coterminous with the formation of the modern
nation-state (32). As a result, membership is identified with participation in the
national culture as defined by authoritative political and cultural institutions.
This ignores the extent to which the formation and maintenance of these defi-
nitions entailed the marginalization and suppression of other identities.

As the fissures and cracks in this edifice have become more evident, with the
resurgence of regional nationalisms and Britain's transition to a multiracial soci-
city, so it has become more than ever necessary to recognize diversity and dif-
ference and to move toward "a new definition of solidarity and coexistence
centred on mutual respect" (19, p. 178). This, in turn, implies a more pluralis-
tic conception of social membership, one that makes room for particularity and
difference and recognizes that the "reconciliation of rival claims and conflicting
interests can only be partial and provisional" (21, p. 30). In the present situa-
tion, then, the social component of citizenship can no longer be defined in
Marshall's terms as "the right to share in full in the social heritage." Rather, it
must be thought of as the right of "individuals and social groups to affirm
themselves and to be recognized for what they are or wish to be" (18, p. 258).

In this light, it is clear that communications and information are central to
the exercise of full and effective citizenship in the contemporary era (29). This
is not in itself a new insight. Liberal democrats have long recognized that
access to adequate information and to a diversity of debate and representations
is a basic precondition for the effective functioning of a democratic polity and
for the full exercise of citizenship rights (1). Accordingly, they have seen the
communications system as an essentially public set of institutions charged with
a duty to provide the necessary resources for effective citizenship. And they
have applied this injunction equally to all organizations, whether publicly man-
aged or privately owned.

We can identify three main kinds of relations between communications
and citizenship. First, people must have access to the information, advice, and
analysis that will enable them to know what their rights are in other spheres
and allow them to pursue these rights effectively. Second, they must have
access to the broadest possible range of information, interpretation, and debate
on areas that involve political choices, and they must be able to use communi-
cations facilities in order to register criticism, mobilize opposition, and propose
alternative courses of action. And third, they must be able to recognize them-
selves and their aspirations in the range of representations offered within the
central communications sectors and be able to contribute to developing those representations.

These rights in turn imply that the communications and information system should have two essential features. At the level of production, it should offer the maximum possible diversity of provision and provide mechanisms for user feedback and participation. At the level of consumption, it should guarantee universal access to the services that can ensure the exercise of citizenship regardless of income or area of residence. The central question is, "Can these essential communicative resources for citizenship be guaranteed by a production and distribution system that is increasingly organized around market mechanisms?" Our answer has to be "no," at least not given the present organizations of the relevant markets and the distribution of income.

Whenever access to the communications and information resources required for full citizenship depends upon purchasing power (as expressed directly through customer payments or indirectly through the unequal distribution of advertising subsidies to production), substantial inequalities are generated that undermine the nominal universality of citizenship. As we shall show, income differentials have widened considerably under the three Thatcher governments at the same time as the communications and information system has been progressively "privatized" and the public sector eroded and commercialized. As a result, the poor suffer from a double disadvantage. They are priced out of the markets for new services and left with an infrastructure of public provision that is either unable or unwilling to provide the full range of resources for citizenship (22).

The next section looks in more detail at the main political and economic dynamics that are currently restructuring the provision of information and communications services. We then chart the pattern of income differentials and indicate their consequences for access to communications and information goods in the new "privatized" marketplace.

"Privatization" is most usefully employed as a general description of economic initiatives that aim to increase the reach of market institutions and philosophies at the expense of the public sphere. Within this process we can identify four main movements: denationalization, which involves selling shares in public companies to private investors; liberalization, which introduces competition into areas that were previously public or private monopolies; the regearing of the regulatory regime to allow corporations more flexibility to maneuver; and the commercialization of those organizations that remain in the public sector, through the introduction of market mechanisms and commercial criteria of evaluation.

From the outset of the Thatcher administrations, communications and information industries have been at the forefront of these shifts. Although a full survey would take us well beyond the scope of this article, privatization's general impact on access to information and communications resources is well illustrated by recent changes in two central areas: telecommunications and television services.
The telephone is the hub of most people's interpersonal information system. Not only does it connect them with the informal networks offered by friends, neighbors, and relatives, it also provides a major point of access to the professional information services of organizations like Citizens' Advice Bureaus, voluntary and community groups, and welfare rights agencies. Indeed, as public funding for these organizations has been steadily whittled away, forcing some to close branches or limit their hours, telephone access has become more important than ever. However, as Table 1 clearly shows, some of the groups most in need of information and advice on their rights are among those least likely to have access to a domestic telephone. And even those who do may find their use curtailed by the relatively high cost of making calls.

When the Post Office administered the telephone network, its policy was to keep down the cost of local calls (which make up the bulk of poor households' use) by cross-subsidizing losses out of the profits generated by trunk and international traffic (most of which was accounted for by business users). In the early 1970s, however, concerted pressure from the corporate community, coupled with the high costs of modernizing the network, led to a relaxation of this policy. Between 1973 and 1978 the price of long-distance calls covering a distance of more than 35 miles dropped by 13 percent, while the real price of local calls at peak times rose by a massive 183 percent (30, pp. 121–146). This rebalancing of the tariff structure in favor of business users has been reinforced by the twin impact of liberalization and denationalization.

In February 1982, the Mercury consortium was granted a license to compete with British Telecom (the renamed telecommunications sector of the old Post Office, hived off from the mail sector by the British Telecommunications Act of 1981). Mercury's main aim was to gain a slice of BT's lucrative business custom; BT responded by cutting the price of trunk and transatlantic calls and moving toward charging customers the full economic costs of local calls. This shift was further accelerated when the majority (50.2 percent) of BT's shares were sold to private investors in November 1984, transforming it from a public utility to a commercial corporation dedicated to maximizing its profits. A 1989
survey revealed that, regulatory limits on pricing notwithstanding, Britain has the second most expensive local calls of any advanced country (25).

Although those without ready access to a domestic telephone have the network of public call boxes to fall back on, here again recent changes have worked to the disadvantage of the poor. BT is in the process of replacing its old stock of coin-operated boxes with metal and glass booths, many of which will accept only a major credit card or a special phone card that has to be purchased beforehand. Although this conversion will undoubtedly reduce vandalism from attempts to break open coin collection boxes, it further restricts access among those who do not have a credit card and are unable to tie up their discretionary spending in advance of making a call. Their problems are compounded by the fact that under the current regulatory arrangements, unlike domestic tariffs, rises in the cost of calls from public boxes are not subject to set limits but are free to respond to judgments of what the market will bear.

The difficulties that low-income groups experience in gaining convenient and affordable access to basic telephone services are further compounded in the case of value-added services. Many of those most able to benefit from these facilities are least able to obtain them.

Home shopping provides a case in point. The poor are already disadvantaged in regard to shopping. Since most do not have access to a car, they are unable to take maximum advantage of the choice and price advantages offered by supermarkets in city centers or hypermarkets on the edge of towns. Instead they are confined to the relatively limited choice and high prices of local shops. This problem is particularly acute for the elderly and the disabled, who have mobility problems. The ability to order goods from a central store and have them delivered to the home would do much to compensate for this situation. Yet the British experience to date clearly shows that such schemes will reach those most in need only if there is extensive public subsidy. Run on a straightforward commercial basis, these programs are invariably geared to servicing the better off, thereby extending the advantages they already enjoy. In this case, poverty not only excludes people from the information and communications resources they need for full citizenship, it also inhibits them from exercising their full rights as consumers (22).

A parallel situation obtains in the area of television services. Historically, television services in Britain have been seen as a public resource that should speak for and to the full range of social experiences and interests and should be available equally to everyone, regardless of level of income or area of residence. This ideal was guaranteed financially by noncompetitive funding, whereby the British Broadcasting Corporation received the whole of the compulsory license fee levied on the possession of a television set, and the Independent Television companies had exclusive rights to sell advertising on ITV and Channel 4 in their franchise areas. A comprehensive system of regulation obliged both the BBC and ITV to maintain a diverse production base capable of addressing a plurality of interests.

This public service duopoly will be dismantled when the plans announced
in the government's 1988 White Paper on broadcasting are implemented (41). The government will allocate the two remaining channels on Britain's five-channel national direct broadcast satellite (DBS) system, operated by British Satellite Broadcasting. It also proposes to license a new national terrestrial service and a number of local multipoint video distribution systems. All of these initiatives would be financed out of varying combinations of spot advertising, sponsorship, and viewer subscriptions and would be regulated by a new body, the Independent Television Commission, which would oversee all commercial television services, including cable. Unlike the present Independent Broadcasting Authority, which supervises the ITV system, the new commission would operate with a "light touch," prioritizing the growth of television services as a business rather than defending and extending broadcasting as a public service in pursuit of diversity. Last, and most significant, the present license fee would be phased out and the BBC's funding switched to a predominantly subscription basis to bring the Corporation into line with the general movement toward a "pay-per" communications system (20).

As the present cable services demonstrate, however, subscription systems operate against the poor by making people's range of choice directly dependent on their ability to pay. In mid-1988, it cost an average of £17.86 a month to buy into cable services (34). This represented a virtual doubling of the average household's expenditure on basic broadcast services. It will cost at least that much again to obtain the full range of new DBS services, over and above the initial outlay on equipment.

Nor is a videocassette recorder necessarily a cheap way to extend the uses of the basic television set. Table 1 shows that there is a strong linear relation between VCR possession and income. Moreover, the more affluent can use their VCRs with greater versatility, for two reasons. First, they are more likely to be able to afford to subscribe to cable or DBS channels and so have access to a greater range of movies and other programs for time-shifting. Second, the recent shake-out in the videotape rental sector resulting in the disappearance of a number of smaller, local outlets has reduced the choices available to many poorer households.

However, even if the effective threat to established broadcast services is less than the more pessimistic commentators are forecasting, the arrival of new services and competition for subscription and advertising income is still likely to have an effect on the range of program production. And as the Report of the Committee on Financing the BBC recognized, those programs that are arguably most central to the provision of resources for citizenship are most at risk in the new commercial environment (40, pp. 127–128). They include investigative documentaries, innovative contemporary drama, and programs for minorities who have low spending power.

One response to this new marketplace is to commercialize public institutions from within. This entails exploiting resources to the maximum by generating spin-off products and merchandising opportunities based on programs and by leasing out spare capacity (23). The BBC is currently pursuing
this strategy with considerable vigor. It has purchased a publishing house to boost its growing stable of magazines based on programs. It also leases parts of its available spectrum space to companies wishing to advertise to clients and to a commercial consortium that downloads a regular medical program, supported by the large pharmaceutical companies, to VCRs in doctors' homes and offices.

The rationale for these activities is that the revenue they generate can be plowed back into general program making. But there is a distinct danger that the tail will end up wagging the dog, so that production ideas come to be evaluated for their merchandising potential and the requirements of commercial clients come to shape the distribution of scarce resources, transferring some from the public to the corporate sector. At the same time, in a period when the real value of the income derived from the public purse is being reduced, there are considerable incentives to look for other ways to make money. Nor is this trend confined to broadcasting. It is evident across the range of public information services, including museums (where entry charges are now being reintroduced) and libraries.

Public library services in Britain are provided and supervised by local government but are governed by legislation and policy set by the Minister of Arts within the Department of Education and Science. In early 1988 the government set out proposals "to enlarge the scope for library authorities to generate increased revenues by joint ventures with the private sector and charging for specialised services" (42, p. 1). These proposals were in line with a number of other initiatives requiring local authorities to put many of their services out to tender to private contractors, including leisure facilities, refuse collection, and school catering. Compared to many of these services, public libraries are small in scale. In 1985–1986 the public library stock was 114 million books, and the service cost only £386 million per year. Nonetheless, it was with an eye toward increasing the minuscule £21.6 million income generated by library services that the proposals were ventured.

In fact, the reception given to this policy was almost uniformly hostile, and in a ministerial announcement in February 1989 (39) most of the proposals were rejected, including suggestions for charging for more popular or recent books. Nonetheless, the door was left open to some of the more significant shifts in the commercialization of public library information services, including new powers to charge users for borrowing nonprint materials, using facilities such as computers, and getting assistance from library staff.

The argument that citizens need extensive access to information about policy initiatives and government activities takes on added urgency at a time when the balance between state and citizen is shifting to the disadvantage of the latter. A number of observers see the growth of state power as an inevitable outcome of the development of capitalist democracies in the last two or three decades. As the role of the state in steering economic and social activities grows, so do the problems it faces in sustaining both the revenues and the legitimacy (cf. 10, 26) to perform this role.

Paradoxically, as neoconservative governments have taken office in many
advanced industrial societies, this crisis of state function has produced a rhetori-
cric of reduced state activity coupled with strengthened statutory agencies and
legislation to secure social and economic stability (cf. 4, 14). Not the least of
the manifestations of this neoliberal strong state, particularly in the United
Kingdom, has been a series of actions designed to control the flow of informa-
tion from government to public. This takes two forms: the positive promotion
of some government action, coupled with selective prevention of public access
to information about other activities.

All governments engage in public relations. Keeping the public informed of
what they are doing while tacitly gilding the lily is far from sinister thought
control. However, the scale and professionalism of public relations have very
rapidly increased in the United Kingdom over the past decade (6).

The most familiar mechanism of direct government public relations is the
Lobby, a privileged and accredited group of journalists regularly briefed by
senior politicians on a non-attributable basis. The system has both detractors
and defenders, but it had become so increasingly and assertively exploited by
1986 that two national newspapers withdrew from the Lobby entirely. The sub-
stantial advance in government public relations has suggested to some that we
are entering a new phase in what Oscar Gandy has referred to as “information
subsidies” (5). A weekly meeting in the Cabinet Office, chaired by the Prime
Minister’s Press Secretary, coordinates and supervises the work of departmental
information officers, ensuring the proper “processing” of information (11). The
British government’s expenditure on publicity has grown from £20 million a
decade ago to £120 million in 1988–1989. Concern about the scale of the
increase and the uses to which these funds are being put had become so great
by early 1989 that the National Audit Office launched a parliamentary investiga-
tion on behalf of the influential all-party Public Accounts Committee.

The corollary of positive promotion is the secretive retention of embarrassing
or inconvenient information. Pressure on the media has been sustained and
occasionally virulent in recent years, ranging from the faintly ludicrous attempt
to suppress the memoirs of a former senior intelligence agent recorded in
Peter Wright’s Spycatcher to the (ultimately unsuccessful) banning of a BBC
documentary on the zircon spy satellite, a lengthy battle over a radio series
dealing with security matters (only eventually broadcast after substantial vet-
ting), and the implementation of the Home Secretary’s ban on broadcasting
interviews with members of named terrorist organizations in Northern Ireland.
Although checkered and in many ways limited as a program of censorship, this
sequence of events is widely regarded as having had a major inhibiting effect
on the adventurousness of critical and independent journalism. Continuing
demands for a Bill of Rights or major liberalization of secrecy legislation have
merely resulted in an Official Secrets Bill that features “a presumption of
secrecy in favour of the government; no provision for freedom of informa-
tion. . . . In short the Government has put forward a carefully modulated deal
which amounts to more secrecy and less information” (31, pp. 17, 20).

At a less elevated level much concern has been aroused by the apparent
coopition of government statistical resources into the service of state public
relations (28). From the abstract view of Habermas this is a structural necessity: "The public realm, set up for effective legitimation, has above all the function of directing attention to topical areas—that is, of pushing other themes, problems, and arguments below the threshold of attention and, thereby, of withholding [sic] them from opinion-formation" (10, p. 70). Statistics describing the level and distribution of unemployment have been subject to well over twenty official redefinitions of terms and categories, making monitoring of data series well-nigh impossible. Regular publication of figures on the number of people living in poverty was discontinued in 1988 to be replaced by a new set of figures that the House of Commons Social Services Committee described in alarm as "likely to lead to an underestimate of the numbers on low income and distort any analysis of this group's standard of living" (16, p. 8).

Clearly, if governments are in the business of positively promoting their own perceptions and interpretations of policy developments while increasingly engaged in a war of attrition with independent media and research, the accessibility of a range of information sources becomes socially and politically vital for citizens. What opportunities exist, then, for people to have access to a range and diversity of communications and information resources?

If the provision of information is increasingly entrusted to the market, then access to that information becomes dependent on economic as well as political and technological constraints. "Tradeable information" is available to those individuals or groups who have the disposable spending power to make discretionary decisions about purchasing information goods and who may forego them without the opportunity costs being too high.

The widening gap in disposable incomes in Britain raises concern about the social effects of this development. In 1988 average gross weekly earnings were £218. However, 7.1 percent earned less than £100 per week and 9.9 percent earned more than £350 per week. Two million men and 2.8 million women earned less than £150, while .7 million people earned more than £450 weekly (38, Part A, Table 1; Part B, Table X5). In the period 1981–1987 the real weekly earnings of the lowest paid decile rose by 11.5 percent, but for the top decile the rise was 24.8 percent (36, Table 5.14). Independent calculations that allow for all taxes suggest a wider differential, with the poorest fifth only 1 percent better off and the best-paid fifth 24 percent better off (2). Not surprisingly, wealth differentials remain vast, the top 5 percent owning 40 percent of wealth in 1985 and the bottom 50 percent owning just 7 percent (36, Table 5.23). At the lower end, the number of people living on or below social security levels of income increased from 9.38 million in 1985 to roughly 11 million in 1988 (16, p. 35; 27).

The consequence of these movements in income differentials is a growing gap between different groups' expenditure choices and patterns. Table 2, which shows the levels of spending on services by income groups, illustrates the markedly higher spending power of better-off groups in this sector. In all wealthier societies, spending on services has been growing as a proportion of consumer expenditure. But lower-income groups have a lower consumption
Table 2: Average 1986 weekly expenditure on services by households in selected income groups (in pounds)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weekly income</th>
<th>Expenditure on services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>£60–80</td>
<td>8.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£100–125</td>
<td>11.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£150–175</td>
<td>19.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£225–250</td>
<td>19.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£325–375</td>
<td>32.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£550 and over</td>
<td>68.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All households</td>
<td>22.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Family Expenditure Survey 1986 (37, Table 5).

elasticity for service goods than higher-income groups; their income is substantially committed to the necessities of food, clothing, fuel, and housing.

In terms of aggregate demand this may not matter. After all, of the £274,318 million of disposable income available to the economy in 1986, the bottom fifth of households commanded only 5.9 percent, while the pockets of the top fifth were burning with 42.2 percent of the total (35, Table 5.18). However, for individual households the implications, not least for their access to information goods and services, are significant in the extreme.

Communications and information goods and services consume a growing proportion of expenditure on services in general. Expenditure on video and television, for example, doubled between 1976 and 1987. (The differentiated pattern of this expenditure is highlighted by Table 3.) Expenditure on communications and information resources increased very rapidly up the income scale, with the partial exception of cinema admissions (which are of very limited importance at all income levels and are just as much differentiated by age and household type) and television (where the flat-rate BBC license fee has a leveling effect on the expenditure gradient).

The outcome of this expenditure pattern displayed in Table 1 shows that the ownership of even traditional hardware like the telephone is severely limited among lower-income groups (and is actually at its lowest among single-parent

Table 3: Average 1986 weekly expenditure on communications goods and services by households in selected income groups (in pounds)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weekly income</th>
<th>TV/video/ audio equipment</th>
<th>Books/newspapers/magazines</th>
<th>Cinema</th>
<th>TV/video rental/license</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>£60–80</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>1.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£100–125</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>1.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£150–175</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>2.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£225–250</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>2.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£325–375</td>
<td>5.33</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>2.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£550 and over</td>
<td>10.19</td>
<td>5.54</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>2.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Family Expenditure Survey 1986 (37, Table 1).
and pensioner groups, arguably those in greatest need of such a communications resource). For video and home computers the differential is even more marked. As we have suggested elsewhere (9), this is unlikely to be relieved by the general tendency to "trickle down," familiar in the diffusion history of previous generations of new technologies and household durables. By their very nature, these goods cumulatively advantage their owners and provide access to expensive and extensive value-added facilities, so that poorer groups are chasing a moving and fast-receding target.

This emerged particularly clearly in a 1989 survey of home computer penetration in the English Midlands (24). Not only were households in lower-income groups less likely to have a computer, but those who did own one were much more likely to have a relatively low-powered and unsophisticated model. They were also much less likely to possess additional hardware such as printers and modems that are essential for a wide range of applications, including horizontal communications with other users.

These economic barriers to developing computer competence were often reinforced by social dynamics. Because there were fewer users in their neighborhoods and they generally worked in jobs that did not involve using computers, the less-well-off computer owners had only limited access to the kinds of advice and support networks enjoyed by more affluent users and therefore experienced more difficulty in sustaining commitment and developing skills.

The general pattern of socioeconomic change, then, suggests that the shift to a more market-oriented provision of information and communications goods is emerging at a time when the ability of different groups in the population to dispose of their income on these goods is being markedly distinguished by widening gaps in income and wealth. Information poverty of society as a whole, generated by the growing power over information held by both state and corporate sectors, is complemented by the information poverty of lower-income groups directly resulting from their material deprivation.

**Questions raised by the concept of citizenship are of crucial interest to researchers concerned with the communications media.** The argument and evidence we have presented here are intended to point up the need to reestablish links between the concerns of communications scholars, especially those narrowly confined by an interest in novel technologies, and broader issues in social and political philosophy.

The tension between the actual operations of capitalist markets and the promise of full and equal citizenship has been a prominent feature of social and political criticism since the beginning of the modern era (12, 33). Markets address people primarily in their role as consumers rather than as citizens. Indeed, they present the freedom to choose among competing products as the central and defining liberty of the modern age. As a consequence, "citizenship becomes less a collective, political activity than an individual, economic activity—the right to pursue one's interests, without hindrance, in the marketplace" (3, p. 5). Clearly, people's economic rights as both producers and consumers
are an essential component of their rights as citizens, but they certainly do not exhaust those rights as we have defined them here.

Nor can the right to purchase or not to purchase be equated with the right to participate in determining the rules that regulate market transactions. Moreover, as we have shown, for many people in contemporary Britain choices in the marketplace are purely nominal, since they lack the economic means to translate their needs and desires into purchases. This is the second major point of tension between the promise of citizenship and market dynamics. Where material inequality massively differentiates people's access to goods and services, and those goods and services are themselves a necessary resource for citizenship, then political rights are the victim of the vicissitudes of the marketplace and its inequitarian structure.

These concerns have been brought into sharp relief in recent years because of the rapid shift in social policy in countries like Britain as the underlying difficulties of the postwar social democratic welfare states have surfaced into radical political innovation and debate. As a consequence, many people are experiencing dislocation in their immediate life situation and uncertainty about their rights. Consequently, there is a greater need than ever for adequate and accessible information and communications resources. Yet people most adversely affected by these changes are the ones with least access to these resources within the new privatized system of communications.

This argument has implications, too, for our approach to research in the field of communications. At the very least we would wish to signal again (8) the dangers in allowing communications research to become too self-enclosed. The most powerful and significant issues to be addressed remain those questions of power, inequality, and social order that have been at the core of social philosophy and research throughout the modern period. We have argued here that the links between citizenship and the newly emerging communications order should occupy a central place in addressing those questions. Otherwise communications research risks betraying not only its own intellectual pedigree and promise but the community and society it serves.

References


