Digital Accessibility is an increasingly important issue, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. For better or worse, the global pandemic made jarringly obvious key issues that people of color have expressed for years. Those in community colleges from underrepresented groups in California often express frustration with completing their classwork due to a lack of digital access (Pun, 2020). Pun states that many of these students not only work part-time or full-time jobs to afford college but they also are subject to overcrowding at public libraries, where they rely on internet access to complete their homework in the first place.

Thomas and Bryant (2024) Discuss how the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) community deals with Open Access (OA) resources. They explain that faculty can not access OA resources or have the funds to secure them although they are otherwise technically available to academic establishments. All the articles mentioned in this paper reference the same problems: people of color are routinely denied access to digital archives, reference materials, and even the internet. It is therefore an unreasonable expectation that individuals from these groups can easily catch up to the rest of society’s internet and information access.

Furthermore, the concept of a library of things is essential to helping bridge the gap between those underserved and the digital world. According to Tracie Hall (2021), Detroit is one of the most internet-impoverished major cities in the country. It is unsurprising to hear this, as many impoverished people of color live there.

In my experience, robust libraries of things are typically relegated to wealthy and affluent communities. The L.E. Phillips Memorial Public Library in Wisconsin was recently one of the first libraries to offer iPads in their library of things (Van Vegten, 2022). This is a distressing factoid, as Van Vegten further states that 64% of low-income users do not have a tablet (p. 9) in their home. This combined with a lack of steady internet access is a recipe for ignorance at best and a devastating financial burden to the marginalized.

Therefore, it stands to reason that given these examples, and others that I will mention throughout this paper, the BIPOC community should be given access to educational tools at no cost, such as iPads, and other technological items, such as laptops, for temporary or permanent use. Higher education cannot be utilized, digital archives cannot be accessed, and meaningful studies by marginalized voices and communities can not reasonably be conducted otherwise.

There is a long and rich history of the BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ community using zines to exchange information (Ramdarshan Bold, 2017), however, the article referenced does not seem to mention whether or not these zines have ever been digital. Given the information stated previously, it is doubtful that this is the case. Though I have heard of zines being a digital asset periodically, it is inferred in this article that zines are primarily a printed resource, and sometimes even handwritten.
 Ultimately, in the United States, digital access and internet accessibility are largely taken for granted. Even if internet access were made a utility or essential service, many marginalized users would still have to access a public library to use the internet. The business hours of these libraries are not conducive to working-class people who have daytime jobs and must study in the evening. This is another barrier to marginalized groups and their information communities (Pun, 2020).
 Information-seeking behavior as it relates to information literacy is another issue. Many community college students, particularly those of color, rely on the public library to figure out how to study and complete coursework for their respective classes. It seems ludicrous that the community colleges these students attend do not offer information literacy classes, and the public library is expected to provide this service. Why is this the case?

There was an incident during the height of the pandemic, in which several high school students accessed the internet for their coursework through the free WiFi of a local Taco Bell (CNN, 2020). If we cannot provide secure access to digital resources in the United States to those in grade school, what hope is there in supporting postsecondary education for the marginalized?
 Furthermore, transgender individuals from the LGBTQIA+ community have expressed distress with a feeling of “otherness” in queer information communities, which are typically confined to cisgender gay and lesbian members of the community. Having personally experienced gatekeeping within the LGBTQIA+ community, particularly by these members of said community, it is understandable that other transgender and nonbinary individuals feel this way. Elspeth Brown (2020) questions whether these spaces are safe spaces for transgender individuals, and further still, are safe spaces for individuals that have intersectionality within the BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ communities, respectively.
 As a nonbinary individual, I have often felt “other” even in traditionally queer-coded spaces. Among cisgender heterosexual people, I experience even more feelings of otherness. I can only imagine how this affects those who are both BIPOC and queer, particularly those of low income who identify as transgender or nonbinary. This issue combined with a lack of digital access seems to be incredibly off-putting for these individuals, and it is amazing to me that they are able, given the many barriers they face, to access the internet at all. I am certain that the (number of) people who have no internet access in the United States are largely people of color, queer, or some combination of these two. A sad statistic indeed, given that in many affluent white communities, these technological objects and the internet access associated with them are both taken for granted. Building generational wealth is impossible without these tools and services, and we are doing a great disservice to these communities by denying them access (Hall, 2021).

Therefore, to make these services usable for marginalized communities, one must first offer free or low-cost access to the Internet, and it must be treated as an essential utility. Secondly, these individuals must be given proper access to hardware, such as laptops, iPads, and other devices. This access must be individualized and privately available at home. Public libraries are unable to assist these users if they lack sufficient resources. To assist marginalized users in achieving their goals, there must be more funding, and more attention paid to these issues (Pun, 2020). It is an unreasonable expectation, therefore, for these groups to build generational wealth without these tools. To say that this is incredibly frustrating is an understatement.

This paper has so far neglected to reference that many of these individuals also likely experience disabilities, such as visual impairments, or neurodivergence such as autism, ADHD, and mental illness. The compounding overlap of these issues is an impossible barrier to overcome for many. The amount of effort and self-determination on the part of marginalized people is unfathomable. For example, the blind and visually impaired (BVI) community particularly suffers in this regard (Xie et. al., 2020).

Another solution to this complex problem would be to provide better funding to community colleges and historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Public libraries are also historically underfunded and rely on community crowdfunding to meet their budgetary goals (Pun, 2020), and this is a resource that the marginalized frequently rely on as a lifeline. Public libraries are often the only resource that these individuals have access to. Funding public libraries and community colleges nationwide would alleviate many of the problems referenced here.

Once that digital access hurdle is overcome, there is the issue of information literacy and teaching the underprivileged how to view and gather information on these archives, databases, and other resources. If all information was completely open access (OA), and all of these individuals were given proper hardware for personal use, there would still be the frustration of not knowing how to access accurate information promptly.

With the increasing prominence of artificial intelligence (AI), there is also a risk of bias when seeking information in this way. According to the American Psychological Association (2024), biased algorithms risk providing false and misleading information, which compounds the other issues noted. As many people from all walks of life rely on AI as an affordable lifeline to access information, this topic becomes increasingly tense and essential to discuss. AI is already being used (and arguably over-used) in many legal matters in which underserved people cannot afford to hire a human legal advisor (Zashin, 2023). As many marginalized people rely heavily on social media to obtain and share information (Pun, 2020), secure online access becomes increasingly vital.

To summarize, the largest issue that the United States faces in terms of digital access for all is a fundamental unbalance of the distribution of resources. 76% of the nation’s Black residents and 62% of Latino residents were slated to be shut out of or underprepared for 86% of US jobs by 2045, according to Brancaccio et al. (2020). It is frustrating and disheartening to think that a global pandemic was the primary catalyst behind discovering these previously unknown issues. If appropriate funding cannot be secured for these individuals, inequality and a lack of equitable access to digital resources will continue unabated. Much in the way that quantitative studies were only recently completed for the blind and visually impaired (BVI) community (Xie et.al., 2020), the BIPOC community has similarly suffered from a lack of qualitative data gathering. Those with intersectional disabilities, the differently-abled, and the BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ communities are all at significant risk of information poverty, and our society cannot expect to benefit from this neglect.

There needs to be an all-encompassing overhaul of the education system in the United States, particularly for postsecondary education. Progressing as a society and building generational wealth go hand in hand, and keeping the country’s wealth in only a few (white) hands is detrimental to society at large. Web accessibility benefits everyone, and it could be argued that denying this information to people of color, LGBTQIA+ individuals (particularly those who are transgendered) also harms those in relatively privileged positions as well. Marginalized groups have a lot of wisdom and intelligence to offer our society, and denying them modern technology is a cruelty that should not be tolerated. The sooner that global society accepts that individuals can and should be equal and that an equitable society is non-negotiable, the sooner humanity can progress.

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