Archives, Feudalism, and Digital Literacy

The Recreation of Social Stratification in the Digital Age

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Abstract

We should not be content to say that power has a need for such-and-such a discovery, such-and-such a form of knowledge, but we should add that the exercise of power itself creates and causes to emerge new objects of knowledge and accumulates new bodies of information.

Michel Foucault (1981, p. 51)

Michel Foucault (1981) is perhaps best known for his explanation of the cyclical relationship between power and knowledge, and how the possession of one confers access to or control over the other. The way that knowledge brings about power is not difficult to imagine; education can improve a person's quality of life, and an exposed secret can ruin it. Lacking a postmodernist approach though, the inverse is difficult to reconcile with. I explore the concept of knowledge ownership through archivism to evidence the relationship Foucault describes with historical and contemporary applications of Erving Goffman (1956)'s theories regarding the self, and Jean Baudrillard (1995)'s theory of simulacra. These theories are further grounded through the likening of proprietary data in a digital world to feudal states.

The second part of this essay addresses the application of information ownership- that is, how skills are deliberately kept out of the public's possession in accordance with how Max Weber (2014) and Émile Durkheim (2014) described division of labor. This treatment of digital skills as specialized work (while expected to be standard knowledge elsewhere) has a marginalizing effect on laborers who are ill-equipped to properly develop and sustain these skills. Additionally, the increased expectation of digital participation as a social subject hinders interpersonal interactions, and can sow further division among groups already distant from each other.

Part I: Archivism and Cyberfeudalism

Background

Knowledge[1] is the primary focus of many early and contemporary archives, with written documentation dating back to Sumerian transaction records (Christian, n.d.; Ishak, 2020) from more than five thousand years ago. While an ancient receipt for beer might not be what most think of as an archive, early written records marked a shift toward utilizing physical evidence as a means of storing knowledge. Where previously all knowledge of this kind of purchase relied on the welfare and recollection of the involved parties and closely-related sources, early writing provides a potentially-immortal secondhand source.

Archives as they might be more easily recognized began sometime around 650 BCE with the Library of Ashurbanipal, commissioned by the king of Assyria to preserve knowledge of his society's culture (Mark, 2023), and the earliest Encyclopedias some 700 years later as Roman statesman Pliny the Elder's Naturalis Historia which sought to consolidate knowledge from other texts of its time (Stannard, 2024). Though about two thirds of Ashurbanipal's library have been destroyed, little is thought to be lost from the remains of Naturalis Historia (Pritchard, 1969; Poutasse, 2018).

Both Naturalis Historia and the Library of Ashurbanipal act as examples of what would become a trend among surviving archives, in the fact that they were either commissioned or produced by members of their society's nobility. While one might immediately lean toward a bittersweet appreciation of the masses of power that allowed such undertakings, this also means that these archives only represent those with the wealth and status to create them. Individuals or institutions are bestowed

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1   Here used to refer to an understanding of the physical world, one's society, and the events of history

the authority to write the narratives that will shape how they and their societies are viewed in retrospect.

Power and Preservation

Many of the works utilized by Pliny the Elder were lost or destroyed following the collapse of the Roman Empire, leaving Naturalis Historia as the de facto collection of the empire's knowledge. Scholar Rachel Poutasse (2018) writes about how it "became the foundation for the medieval understanding of the natural world", and despite being incorrect about many of its subjects, did not receive significant opposition until the end of the Middle Ages. While perhaps an impressive feat for its time, Naturalis Historia became a vessel by which a very small number of people were able to influence much of societal development for over a thousand years. Through the privilege of its status, a book riddled with inaccuracies served as an authority on knowledge of the natural world during a time period renown for its scientific illiteracy (Doody, 2010).

The criteria by which independent actors determine what their definitive collection excludes cannot be known, perhaps even to themselves. In his attempts to compile all Roman knowledge, Pliny the Elder adopted the power to strike fact from history. As a statesman and writer, he could not personally verify most of what he wrote. But because his power allowed his writing to outlast most other products of its time, he successfully became an authority on swaths of fields he had never studied. In what would become the definitive collection of roman knowledge, it's unclear what information might have been lost, why it was omitted, and how different the world it created would be if not for its mass of scientific untruths.

Archives and Narratives

In *Presentation of Self*, Goffman writes about the ways that a subject will obscure, obfuscate, or fabricate information to make interactions more manageable and predictable to aid in the pursuit of their goals. While Goffman's writing focuses on interpersonal relations, it's not difficult to map these concepts onto institutions, and how one might also deliberately craft their image for those they will never meet (Goffman, 1956).

The Library of Ashurbanipal serves to demonstrate Goffman's concepts of selective self-presentation in both its creation and destruction. The library is said to have been created to preserve the history and culture of Mesopotamia, and it's very likely that both Ashurbanipal and contemporary scholars of the library truly believe that to be the case. This stated goal can only be partially true however, as it naturally would preserve what Ashurbanipal valued about the region he ruled. Given his rule included conquered territories over which he struggled to maintain power, it's not difficult to imagine that there are cultures and works that he might have made efforts to omit.

Much of what Ashurbanipal's empire had produced was destroyed when the empire fell mere decades after the establishment of the library. Invading forces are said to have made efforts to not only conquer the empire, but to scrub it from history as well. The only reason the surviving parts of the library remain is because they had been buried for so long- a fact which can be attributed to the scale of the library, only possible by Ashurbanipal's status. Destruction of records is commonly seen in conquest and imperialism, as much of the following power struggle relies on erasing the notion that an enemy ever existed. Despite being remembered for his archivism, Ashurbanipal likely engaged in similar destruction (Mark, 2023).

It's not difficult to identify more modern attempts to erase history by those with power. Countless other acts of inhumane historical violence certainly fit the bill, many of which sought the

same goal: eradicating opposing histories, and enshrining their as the truth. The United States is no stranger to this practice. The violence of colonization in the Americas and queer oppression is watered down, the American Civil War is decreasingly taught to have been started over slavery, and the United States is framed as a hero of the second world war even though it avoided participation until provoked- and maintained the imprisonment of homosexual holocaust victims (AICE, n.d.). Only last year we saw Gaza's primary library, home to thousands of cultural and historical records, destroyed in Israeli bombings- just the latest in a series of attacks on sites of Palestinian importance (Osman, 2023).

This authoritative control over knowledge offers unique benefits to those who wield it. Individual actors become overwhelmingly influential writers for their chapter in history, granting associates (such as proceeding ideologues, or their nation-state) with a deliberately-crafted reputation and social capital.

Simulation and Simulacra

> *Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it[…] Whereas representation attempts to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum.*
>
> **Jean Baudrillard (1995, p. 4-6)**

This act of crafting historical narratives is reminiscent of Baudrillard's concept of simulacrum. Baudrillard writes that in four stages, simulations of reality eventually replace that which they once represented (referred to by Baudrillard as simulacra) through the use of signs to create a hyperreality.

In the case of archivism, historical events as they are experienced serve as the simulacra, and are difficult to compare simulations against due to of our inability to revisit the original. Firsthand witnesses of simulacra do not last forever, and the simulations they produce can be deceitful or altered.

We've established that relative power also affects what simulations are enabled to persist and which ones are hindered. Presented below is how historiography maps onto Baudrillard's framework of simulation, exampled by the co-opting of the contemporary queer liberation movement.

Stage 1

> *In the first case, the image is a good appearance — representation is of the sacramental order.*
>
> **Jean Baudrillard (1995, p. 6)**

The first stage of simulation is a reflection of the simulacra. The reflection is a genuine attempt at representing basic reality as the messenger understands it.

Reflections appear as victims of queerphobia express the ways that they are harmed by institutions such as employment and housing discrimination (Mallory & Sears, 2016; Sears, Mallory, Flores & Conron, 2021), the state's ability to criminalize sexuality (Rhodes, 2022), and medical neglect of queer people (Mirza & Rooney, 2018). At this stage, the sign of a pride flag might represent opposition to these systems.

Stage 2

> *In the second, it is an evil appearance — it is of the order of maleficence.*
>
> **Jean Baudrillard (1995, p. 6)**

The second stage of simulation is a perversion of the simulacra. The perversion is a disingenuous attempt at representing basic reality, but can be used to understand the existence of a basic reality.

In our example, the opposition to these systems of oppression is translated by the social and political establishment into a desire to become adopted into them. As Ryan (Conrad, 2014) writes in their critique of queer assimilation Against Equality, "What assimilationist gays are really asking is that the heterosexuals share some of their privilege with queers who want to be like them". Rather than

denying the state the right to legitimize love between consenting adults, monogamous gay marriages are made legal. Now, pride flags represent a push to enter into these systems.

Stage 3

> *In the third, it plays at being an appearance — it is of the order of sorcery.*
>
> **Jean Baudrillard (1995, p. 6)**

The third stage of simulation is a masking of the simulacra. The masking is not only a disingenuous attempt at representing basic reality, but also an attempt to present itself as a genuine representation of basic reality.

The systems of oppression wielded against queer people might be obfuscated as individual acts of oppression- now that queer assimilation has been legally enabled, the victims of queerphobia are denied a claim to oppression. Struggles of queer people against the system from this point onward are attributed to personal shortcomings at best, and a random encounter with an individual bigot at worst. The pride flag now doesn't represent any relationship to systems, but identifies a person's approval of queer individuals.

Stage 4

> *In the fourth, it is no longer of the order of appearances, but of simulation.*
>
> **Jean Baudrillard (1995, p. 6)**

The fourth stage of simulation is a substitution of the simulacra. The substitution is complete detachment from any basic reality in which the audience is only subject to other simulations, and has no connection to a basic reality. At this point, those subject to the simulacra no longer exist within basic reality, but instead what Baudrillard called a "hyperreality".

Particularly as queer elders age and pass away, connections to queer liberation are lost. An increasing demographic of queer people are brought up with little to no way of referencing the original

simulacra of queer liberation as they are immersed in the neoliberal simulations which present queer liberation as one with assimilation. Equality is presumed, and remaining aberrant queer presentation and identities (such as polyamorous relationships and xenogenders) are deemed illegitimate. Banks and police march at pride parades, and queer people become a target demographic for businesses. The pride flag, once a deliberate symbol of counterculture, is now exclusively a commodity to be bought and sold, and no longer draws one's mind towards the oppression that inspired it.

Throughout this process of co-opting queer signs, much of the actual oppression that was originally protested has persisted. Homelessness and poverty continue to disproportionately affect queer people (Wilson, Bouton, Badgett & Macklin, 2023), the ability to ban healthcare through legislative processes have begun threatening peoples' lives (Choi & Mullery, 2023), and because the state maintains authority over marriage legitimacy, credible threats to gay marriage and its conferred benefits persist (Lemon, 2022).

The same logic follows for the other examples provided. The reframing of the civil war appears absurd when you recognize the first-stage simulations of confederate motives expressed a strong interest in slavery (Ladd, 2015), but it was then perverted into states rights. From there it turns to economic anxieties, and eventually advocates for slavery become enshrined as proponents of freedom as they rebelled from the oppressive union. Responsibility for American colonialism and the genocide of indigenous Americans was not denied by their perpetrators (Moine, 2017; Onion, Sullivan, Mullen & Zapata, 2021), but attempts at justification depended on myths of violence describing natives as non-human. In obscuring the genocide of Native Americans, many were pushed into smaller and smaller reservations, and native youth were frequently homed with white families in attempts to force assimilation. Eventually the native victims of genocide grew so distant from public perception that they've become a class of fictional character.

Biopolitics and Knowledge

This understanding of the proliferation of knowledge is further supported by Michel Foucault's theory of biopolitics. In addition to the commonly understood sovereign power, Foucault proposes an additional model of violent power brandished through inaction. The former, referred to as "sovereign power" is described as being passively engaged in the fostering of life, and actively engaged in its destruction- one might imagine United States' law enforcement as an example. Having no legal obligation to protect citizens (U.S. Supreme Court, 1989), the institution of the police is not designed to foster life. Instead, it is reactive, punishing criminal offenses through the state's monopoly on legitimate violence.

Biopower is the latter of the described models of power. It is the inverse of sovereign power, being engaged in fostering life, but still allowing death passively, which might be most easily demonstrated through the United States' healthcare system. Though outwardly working toward the sustenance of life, its exclusivity (through medical racism, ableism, and debt accumulation) disallows members of certain groups from benefiting from any such sustenance.

This use of power/politics in preservation extends to areas of society beyond individual well-being. In this chapter, we have seen examples of proactive erasure of records, such as the collapse of the Roman and Assyrian empires. However, the surviving archives of each are emblematic of active political power contributing to longer-term preservation.

Archives in the Digital Age

Archivism has changed in recent decades, thanks in no small part to the internet. Where historical attempts to compile knowledge were costly, time-consuming, and laborious, today we have the ability to access more information than any prior archive ever held at a fraction of the cost, whether that be in time, money, or energy. At first glance, this appears to be a success for the propagation of

knowledge to the people of the world, but for the reasons detailed in the previous section, modern archivism is still subject to curation on the basis of social and economic capital.

In his video essay *How Can We Bear to Throw Anything Away?*, Jacob Geller (2023) asks the titular question as he explores hoarding behavior in people, particularly in an increasingly digital world. Geller argues that the archives we are watching develop in real-time exist in a non-democratic state due to the nature of the infrastructure we've built our wells of knowledge on. Psychological research has found evidence that what's often identified as hoarding behavior is frequently a trauma response from said hoarder (Tolin, 2011). A formerly homeless person might find it difficult to get rid of broken or excess possessions due to the unique value they placed in them when personal possessions were difficult to secure. It stands to reason that those digital hoarders Jacob Geller talks about might experience a similar anxiety relating to the lack of ownership that inherently comes with digital information.

It's well-established that wealth has historically conferred privileged input as to what media and information is preserved, and what's thrown out. Today, despite having instant access to deep wells of knowledge through the internet, the forces that power it are referred to as the "information economy" for the financial incentive behind the knowledge and media maintained online.

The speed at which online content can be delivered is the same as at which it can be revoked. At any moment, companies like Google, Apple, Disney, and Nintendo have the ability to deny access to some product of human labor for reasons left to their sole discretion. Because these companies often exist as near-monoliths in their function, little meaningful competition can substitute what these companies provide. In the event of copyrighted or trademarked media, it can even be illegal to do so. As such, the effects of selective archiving are now felt in real-time.

Intellectual property and copyright laws provide legal protections to corporations which view arts and knowledge not as a public good to be shared, enjoyed, and learned from- but as assets with

which profits can be maximized. Intellectual property rights can be weaponized in numerous ways, from shelving that which you own the rights to and halting its legal consumption, to abusing this legal system to claim additional protections.

Power, Knowledge, and Technology

> *The feudal character of cyberspace emerges from the hierarchical privatization of its government associated with the granting of Internet domains. In particular, ICANN is a private entity that controls a most precious commodity—cyberspace "land" in the form of domain names.*
>
> **Alfred C. Yen (2002, p. 1239)**

During much of the early internet, prior to its centralization, it appeared as though we might have overcome many class-based flaws in creating the perfect archive of human knowledge. It appeared to be a repository in which knowledge and art can be freely traded, providing its users access to more content in a few hours than nobility could acquire in their lifetime. The problem though, was that the speed of change paired with the widening specialization required to maneuver digital environments has created a technological stratum out of those subject to it. It's not feasible for the average (or even a highly-skilled) person to personally maintain knowledge pertaining to every component of their digital activity, so their maintenance is outsourced to privately operated entities.

This vision only lasted so long, as monopolies began to form in this new internet economy. Apple is famous for the restrictive yet approachable systems it produces that pull users in, hook them with convenience, and ensnare them with the inconvenience of migrating to other platforms. Apple devices are generally restricted from running software that isn't explicitly approved by them, providing the company final say over how users interact with much of their technology.

Google has grown from the search engine it started as to an advertising behemoth whose business model is now centered around data collection. Advertisements on nearly every website use

Google's advertising network, and can use it to track users regardless of if they have a Google account. Nearly every online advertisement you see is personalized to what you are most likely to click on according to their algorithm that cares only for the profit is accrues.

Alphabet (Google's parent company) also owns YouTube, the primary host for long-form video content. Having essentially no competition in their product model, Google and dominant platforms like Twitter and Facebook have the power to suppress or outright remove content and speech, most often to appease advertisers. In 2019, YouTube's advertising algorithm was found to be marking videos by queer creators as ineligible for receiving ad revenue Lothian-McLean (2019). Twitter, now owned solely by Elon Musk, began banning users simply for discussing alternative platforms to twitter Roth (2022).

Centralization and Division of Labor

This centralization has undoubtedly served to make modern technology highly accessible, but it isn't without consequence. Learning how to perform, and exercising everyday digital tasks exclusively within closed-source environments fosters a digital literacy that is only applicable within a privately-owned system. In an article on the transferability of digital skills taught in public schools, Kiersten Greene (2018, p. 12) writes that "proprietary technologies keep users locked into using costly software or programs that are tied to specific devices or operating systems." Through contracts with primary schools, companies like Microsoft, Google, and Apple maintain create populations of citizenry that become siloed within proprietary digital environments.

Take for example email, the leading means of online communication. While it's built upon open-source protocols, private companies like Google, Microsoft, and Apple account for the largest share of e-mail traffic (Gilbert, 2024). This echoes what I've seen, both in my personal and professional life. Having grown up during the explosion of the internet, online communication training was

encouraged in my upbringing. The first email account I had was hosted through my parent's internet service provider, and eventually I would migrate to an address hosted by Google. In middle and high school, my district email was managed through Microsoft's Office 365, which later hosted the email servers for my first job out of high school, and first two colleges. At time of writing, my university and work emails are both hosted by Google.

Part II: Digital Literacy

Digital Literacy and Bureaucracy

> *all specialized office management—and such management is distinctly modern—usually*
> *presupposes thorough training in a field of specialization*
>
> **Max Weber (2014, p. 342)**

In his writing on bureaucracy, Max Weber identified the characteristics becoming of a "modern officialdom". Included in his list, and of particular interest to us are record-keeping, set processes, and specialization. A bureaucratic system's dependence on documentation makes clear the role that literacy plays, and is heavily tied to our two other characteristics. "Files" are essential in recording procedure and bureaucratic operations, mastery over which confers institutional specialization (Weber, 2014).

Oft-praised are the effects an increasingly digital world has on information delivery and processing in modern bureaucratic systems. A significant amount of labor can now be performed regardless of physical distance from colleagues or clientele, and much clerical work has been made redundant by self-service kiosks. Bernardo (2022) provides some brief examples including both online and in-person banking, auditory and visual communication, medical consultations, and much more. In addition to the convenience this lends to these systems' usual subjects, it also introduces newfound accommodations to those with disabilities (McNamara & Stanch, 2021).

However, a weakness (and even detriment) of these conveniences is located in their centralized, bureaucratic design. While it may be true that a rising tide lifts all boats, it's less than helpful if you're stranded on shore. The digitization of systems is certainly preferential to the bureaucracy, and might confer a level of convenience to its target demographic, but the associated rigidity serves to codify rules in a way that marginalizes those who require exceptions.

One such exception is the inability to interact with the system's interfaces. Imagine a fully-automated grocery store, staffed only by machines capable of sorting and shelving items, self-checkout kiosks, and other maintenance machines. While perhaps desirable to do away with monotonous work, the people interacting with these systems are not predictable. A person who struggles to comprehend digital menus and can't interact with the self-checkout system becomes functionally banned from shopping. In more grounded examples, one can imagine food stamps (and other forms of welfare), vehicle registration, and health insurance being made inaccessible for a percentage of the population by complicated online forms.

This does not only hold true for services offered by the bureaucracy, but also for that which it expects of its subjects. Suppose that the IRS were to suddenly require tax returns be filed digitally, and refuses to process tax returns filed on paper. For those who normally file their taxes digitally, nothing of note is changed. Those who filed paper tax returns have to adapt to the new requirements, regardless of why they opted not to use the digital option. The five percent of the American adult population not online must now acquire internet access (Pew Research Center, 2024), and those struggling to navigate digital interfaces must now perform a complicated legal process in a foreign environment. Failure to do so could result in prosecution, essentially criminalizing a level of digital illiteracy.

Literacy and Marginalization

The economic consequence of illiteracy is not news. It's generally understood to be correlated with lower income, weakened class mobility, poor mental health, and vulnerability to legal or financial manipulation. These are often interwoven with the social consequences, such as poor hygiene practice and health knowledge, which might subject a person to increased medical expenses (Lal, 2015). Illiteracy also correlates with antisocial behavior, particularly criminal activity, though this correlation is only causal by proxy of poverty (Clark & Haderlie, 2020).

Illiteracy is not only a cause for marginalization, as it is often itself caused by economic or social anxieties, creating a loop that is difficult for victims to escape. Doctor Banoth Lal (2015) discusses how illiteracy is most frequently caused by parents lacking education, home environments not conducive to literacy, economic marginalization, and disability.

The implications of digital illiteracy are not dissimilar except in the pace at which standards for literacy are changing. While acknowledging that language and literature do evolve significantly over the course of a person's lifetime, the change is often gradual, regional, and passively remedied in the individual. Digital information does not share these characteristics. Changes in digital environments are typically developed privately, outside the public eye, meaning changes in consumer technology appear more rapidly, with news of it being received by the majority of its target audience in as little as a day. While the tools used to read and write remain recognizable looking centuries into their history, it's taken mere decades for digital information technology to transform wildly.

The expectation for nontechnical laborers to be proficient with technical tools has already made evident conflicts in our current digital literacy methodology. Promises of convenience and ease-of-use are easy to question when these systems frequently interrupt laborers' anticipated workflow. Unclear error messages, incomplete instructions, improper training, and systems failures are only a few valid reasons that I have personally been approached by learners and laborers in need of assistance. Many of these cases are ongoing or repeating issues, and users frequently express frustration in response. This reaction is not unjustified- why do we submit ourselves to modes of production that appear to be in constant conflict with the duties assigned to us?

Digital Literacy and Division of Labor

> *To be a person is to be an autonomous source of action. Man acquires this quality only in so far as there is something in him which is his alone and which individualizes him[…] but it is still necessary for this faculty to be exercised towards ends and aims which are proper to the agent*
>
> **Émile Durkheim (2014, p. 183-184)**

Through Max Weber, we gain insight into the swelling systemic role that digital ecosystems play in society- as well as what that means for participation in such a system. In his characterization of bureaucracies, Weber's repeated return to specialization is perhaps most notable to the typical laborer, one beholden to its resulting division of labor, rather than traversing it with autonomy.

The reliance on particular laborers remaining in particular positions is already fraught with dismissal of economic and social needs, yet our society is built on a fundamental premise that laborers are neatly fit into suitable and fulfilling roles. Émile Durkheim suggests that this notion might not be itself problematic as productive social roles can positively contribute to an individual's sense of identity, but that issues arise when an individual's labor fails to satisfy their social needs or desires.

I believe that this failing of division of labor is characteristic to the way that digital literacy is communicated. Digital literacy is not provided to all laborers, rather it is only imbued in those whose labor partition is associated with the relevant skills, or those who are anticipated to become productive in such fields. This fact demands recognition of classism, sexism, and ageism in our digital literacy training, rather than individualizing the issue of digital illiteracy. It explains the perpetuation of male dominance in technical fields, and the everlasting barriers of entry to economic mobility in our allegedly-equitable digital future. It additionally encourages an empathetic approach toward demographics who might often be seen as antagonistic toward or withdrawn from technology.

This perception appears to be most often applied to elder members of society. From my experience in technical fields where our focus was on user support, older clientele is generally (though

far from always) less independent in troubleshooting and applying instruction. As a result, a 30-minute issue for a client in their 20s might last a full shift for a client in their 60s. This tends to leave support staff with a perception that this demographic is difficult or time-consuming to work with, when the issue stems from the fact that technical support teams are not designed to facilitate learning in bureaucratic institutions. Instead, they act as gatekeepers of knowledge, operating not in support of the user, but as an extension of the technical system they represent. The role of technical support is that of a safeguard to bridge short gaps in expertise, but was never intended to enable users to fully cross the divide, as proprietary knowledge in the hands of the public would threaten to circumvent the bureaucratic system, and diminish its own relevance.

As technology continues to develop, the baseline of expected digital literacy rises with it. For active students of primary, secondary, and post-secondary schools, this is included as a part of their education. However, this formal training does not continue in one's career outside specialized labor, nor has it always been available. Keeping laborers up to date on rapidly-changing skills is a diminishing return on investment as laborers age; therefore efforts are primarily targeted toward those who are fresh to the workforce, or yet to enter it.

Division of Labor and Alienation

The relegation of digital literacy to just another type of specialization carries social consequences in addition to the systemic and economic, not for dissimilar reasons. The internet is a communication technology at its core, so instant messaging and social media was a natural outgrowth. The cultural impact of this development can't be understated, yet is simultaneously self-evident. Not three decades ago, it would have been difficult to imagine a person whose primary means of interacting with other people was virtually, yet that became the norm for many people during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Without discounting the public health efforts and successes of the shift to remote productivity, it made clear that comfort in digital environments was necessary to fully engage in emerging social structures. While in-person conversations weren't made obsolete, lacking dual access with digital communication does restrict a person from significant social real estate. Discussion of current events and pop culture spreads quicker and differently than it does by physical means, and the over-representation of those more attuned to digital spaces creates and sustains a generational divide.

While certainly not entirely to blame, this might in part explain some sources of generational conflict. Bernardo (2022) writes about the effect that ageism has on elder members of society, including a cyclical relationship to technology-related anxieties which result in aversion to technology, which continues to create a perception of this population as being unreasonably regressive. In the midst of this dismissal, their unique and shared struggles are shelved for generational warfare which denies both the young and the old any solidarity with those who may well have insight or find comradery in each other's marginalization.

Conclusion

Closing Thoughts

Prior to this research, my approach to the issue of digital illiteracy was informed primarily by my personal and professional experience with technical help and education. As such, my instinctive approach to resolving the issue of digital literacy was to explore ways to make digital literacy training more accessible, and how to encourage people to sharpen their digital skills after formal education, even when not demanded by their profession.

This approach fell apart quickly as I interrogated the role that digital literacy holds in neoliberal bureaucracies. Addressing the crux of the issue leaves us with an issue of system, not of the individual. Digital literacy as asked of laborers and consumers demands that time and labor be spent producing knowledge that is dependent upon private enterprise for its continued value, and is thus ultimately owned by them. Citizens are not inspired nor helped to become digitally literate in ways which are primarily beneficial to them.

Solutions to this dilemma frankly do not appear to be feasible so long as democracy is not embedded in the digital systems we design our infrastructure around. We can attempt to remedy the stratification of digital literacy by providing ongoing and retroactive digital systems training, however this does not decouple this knowledge from its proprietary vendors.

Where I previously believed in the viability of making digital literacy universally available, it's clear now that this alone cannot resolve the present problems of exploitation and monopolization. Rather, we ought to explore where digital systems privatize what could well be openly-standardized, and publicly develop systems that focus on providing comparably accessible alternatives.

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