

SOCIAL ISSUE PAPERS

9.1 ISSUE REACTION PAPERS

The purpose of being assigned to write an issue reaction paper is to develop and sharpen your critical thinking and writing skills. The model originated from Professor Stephen Jenks, formerly of the University of Central Oklahoma. Your objective in writing this type of paper is to define an issue clearly and to formulate and clarify your position on that issue by reacting to a controversial statement. Completing this assignment requires accomplishing the following six tasks:

1. Select a suitable reaction statement.
2. Explain your selection.
3. Clearly define the issue addressed in the statement.
4. Clearly state your position on the issue.
5. Defend your position.
6. Conclude concisely.

9.1.1 *Select a Suitable Reaction Statement*

Your first task is to find or write a statement to which to react. Reaction statements are provocative declarations. They are controversial assertions that beg for either a negative or a positive response. Your instructor may assign a reaction statement, you may find one in a newspaper or on the Internet or hear one on television, or you may construct one yourself, depending on your instructor's directions. The following statements may elicit a polite reply but will probably not stir up people's emotions. They are, therefore, not good reaction statements:

It's cold out today.
 Orange is not green.
 Saturday morning is the best time to watch cartoons.

The following statements, however, have the potential to be good reaction statements, because when you hear them you will probably have a distinct opinion about them:

Abortion is murder.
 Capital punishment is necessary.
 Government is too big.
 Welfare is bad.

Such statements are likely to provoke a reaction, either negative or positive depending on the person who is reacting to them. While they may be incendiary, they are also both ordinary and vague. If your instructor assigns you a statement to which to react, you may proceed to the next step. If you are to select your own, select or formulate one that is provocative, imaginative, and appropriate to the course for which you are writing the paper. Professor Johnson, for example, once assigned this statement in his Social Problems class:

Parents should not use corporal punishment to discipline their children.

Consider the following examples of reaction statements for other sociology classes:

Juveniles who commit heinous crimes should be certified and tried as adults.
 Social service agencies should be run more like businesses.
 The Supreme Court should take an active role in determining social policy.
 Police officers should not carry weapons of deadly force.
 Workers should be forced to retire by age sixty-five.

Where do you find good reaction statements? A helpful way is to think about subjects that interest you. When you hear something in class that sparks a reaction because you either agree or disagree with it, you know you are on the right track. Be sure to write your statement and ask your instructor for comments on it before beginning your paper. Once you have completed your selection, state it clearly at the beginning of your paper.

9.1.2 *Explain Your Selection*

After you have written the reaction statement, write a paragraph that explains why it is important to you. Be as specific as possible. Writing "I like it" does not tell the reader anything useful, but sentences like the following are informative: "Innocent people are being shot down by violent gangs in the inner city. We must crack down on gang violence in order to make the inner city safe for all who live there."

9.1.3 Clearly Define the Issue Addressed in the Statement

Consider the statement assigned by Professor Johnson: "Parents should not use corporal punishment to discipline their children." What is the most important issue addressed in this statement? Is it the notion that corporal punishment diminishes children's self-esteem, that spanking children will somehow cause them to feel hostile and aggressive? Or is it the possibility that parents might lose control of their children if they don't spank them? Perhaps some aspects of the statement are more important than others. As you define the issue addressed in the statement, you provide yourself with some clarification of the statement that will help you state your position.

9.1.4 Clearly State Your Position on the Issue

In response to Professor Johnson's statement, you might begin by saying: "It seems reasonable to assume that no one likes to be hit and that being hit causes feelings of resentment and hostility. Parents who say you can't discipline children without spanking them obviously are confused about the meaning of the word discipline." The reader of this response will have no doubt about where you stand on this issue.

9.1.5 Defend Your Position

You should make and support several arguments to support your stand on the issue. When evaluating your paper, your instructor will consider the extent to which you did the following:

- Identified the most important arguments needed to support your position
- Provided facts and information, when appropriate
- Introduced new or creative arguments to those traditionally made on this issue
- Presented your case accurately, coherently, logically, consistently, and clearly

9.1.6 Conclude Concisely

Your concluding paragraph should sum up your argument clearly, persuasively, and concisely. When writing this assignment, follow the format directions in Chapter 3 of this manual. Ask your instructor for directions concerning the length of the paper, but in the absence of further directions, your paper should not exceed five pages (typed, doublespaced).

The following sample issue reaction paper (starting on page 159) was written by a student in a Social Problems class at the University of Central Oklahoma. As you read it, try to identify its strengths and weaknesses.

SAMPLE ISSUE REACTION PAPER

A Positive Response to the Reaction Statement

"Electronic voting machines should not be used to elect our government officials."

by

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for

Social Problems 2203

Section 23816

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April 8, 2005

SAMPLE ISSUE REACTION PAPER (CONT.)

The controversy over “hanging and dimpled chads” on Florida ballots in the presidential election of 2000 has intensified efforts to require the use of electronic voting machines in our elections. There are many different methods of voting in the United States, ranging from paper ballots to mechanical voting machines, butterfly punch cards and, in a growing number of jurisdictions, electronic voting machines. Ballots have been modernized over time, ostensibly to ensure the accuracy and speed of election night reporting of results. However, computerized methods of counting votes have caused an unacceptable degree of controversy, and should not be used to elect our officials if we are to maintain voter confidence in our government.

The primary reason computer-based voting is a bad idea is that the manufacturers of electronic voting machines refuse to reveal their source code even to election officials. Because source codes control the storage and display of data, unscrupulous officials could use them to manipulate election outcomes. To foster confidence in voting results the process needs to be as transparent as possible. Without the ability to examine the source code to ensure that an election is not rigged, there can be no confidence that the results of an election truly represent the will of the people.

Manufacturers of the voting computers claim the source code is “proprietary” and cannot be revealed to anyone outside their companies for fear that others will misappropriate the programming. Voting is “proprietary” too; it belongs exclusively to the people, not a private company. Without the ability to examine the source code there is simply no way to verify the fairness of any election outcome. Programming the voting computers outside public view can easily rig the outcome for candidates supported by the voting machine manufacturers.

Another reason why computerized voting damages voter confidence is that sometimes computers crash. What to do with a vote cast at the time a computer freezes? Will that vote not count? What if poll workers are unable to re-boot a

SAMPLE ISSUE REACTION PAPER (CONT.)

crashed computer? Will all previous votes cast be lost in cyberspace entirely? The risk is too great that votes will not be counted in the event of a computer malfunction.

Another potential problem is that recounts, one potential way of discovering voting errors, will become a thing of the past if voting computers are used. In the past when the outcome of an election was close the apparent losing candidate could file for an official recount. In some cases errors have been caught and a new winner has been declared when paper ballots or mechanical voting machine totals were recounted. Electronic voting results will be the same every time a recount function command is entered on computers—garbage in, garbage out.

Another objection to using voting computers is that they are not currently programmed to provide a paper trail, which many believe is essential to guaranteeing the accuracy of elections. Representatives of computer voting machine manufacturers have claimed that it would be too difficult to program these computers to provide a check-and-balance paper trail. One person opposing the use of computers recently mused on a CNN talk show, “We can drive a little rover on the surface of Mars with a computer joystick on Earth, and we can’t program voting computers to spit out a paper receipt?”

Defending the use of computer voting machines, one manufacturer spokesperson recently said on yet another television talk show, “The public wants electronic voting machines because they want fast results of an election.” However, a search of public interest groups clamoring for instant election results comes up empty. The media, not the public, is interested in fast results. What the public is interested in are true and accurate election results.

Even more alarming than the potential for error in using computer voting machines at polling places is the prospect of voting over the Internet. Hackers routinely break into so-called secure Web servers just to prove they can. Some hackers have even compromised data during their cybermeddling. Having the outcome of

SAMPLE ISSUE REACTION PAPER (CONT.)

a national election decided in the bedroom of a seventh-grade hacker would destroy the credibility of voting altogether. Our current premise for voting is "one man, one vote," but if the results of elections can be left to the whim of some cyberkid who hacks into these computer voting machines and alters the vote count, the new premise might well be "one gigabyte, thirty million votes."

Why does it matter that electronic voting seems to be on the fast track for national approval? Simply put, it will further erode the confidence voters have in the election process itself and erode the confidence people have in their government. Confidence was already shaken somewhat when the outcome of the 2000 presidential election was decided not at the ballot box or at the Electoral College, but at the bench of the Supreme Court.

Voter turnout has been declining for years. Participation in our democracy will likely decline even more once people begin to feel like their vote won't count. Widening the chasm between the voters and their government can be described as the *allegiant divide*. Citizens will come to believe they have no real stake in the operation of their government, and electronic voting might well lead to anarchy or, worse, the loss of freedoms that we cherish.

Therefore, electronic voting machines should not be used to elect our government officials. Instead, we should abandon the idea of using computers to register votes. We should also rid ourselves of mechanical voting machines and the butterfly punch card ballots and return to the old-fashioned paper ballot. The paper ballot should have large empty boxes in which voters can place an "X" to vote for their candidate.

Sure, it will take many more hours to tally the results, but we will have bolstered the active participation of people in the process of electing our officials. Society will benefit by having government servants elected in a fair and verifiable manner. Conversely, our society will be harmed if a devious computer programmer can select officials on our behalf.

9.2 SOCIAL ISSUE ANALYSIS PAPERS

9.2.1 Basic Concepts of Social Analysis

In 1956, sociologist C. Wright Mills published *The Power Elite*, a social and political analysis of American society. According to Mills (1956), the United States is controlled by a "power elite" composed of influential business, government, and military leaders who interact with each other socially and professionally.

The power elite is not an aristocracy, which is to say that it is not a political ruling group based upon a nobility of hereditary origin. It has no compact basis in a small circle of great families whose members can and do consistently occupy the top positions in the several higher circles that overlap as the power elite. But such nobility is only one possible basis of common origin. That it does not exist for the American elite does not mean that members of this elite derive socially from the full range of strata composing American society. They derive in substantial proportions from the upper classes, both new and old, of local society and the metropolitan 400. The bulk of the very rich, the corporate executives, the political outsiders, the high military, derive from, at most, the upper third of the income and occupational pyramids. Their fathers were at least of the professional and business strata, and very frequently higher than that. They are native-born Americans of native parents, primarily from urban areas, and, with the exception of the politicians among them, overwhelmingly from the East. They are mainly Protestants, especially Episcopalian or Presbyterian. In general, the higher the position, the greater the proportion of men within it who have derived from and who maintain connections with the upper classes. The generally similar origins of the members of the power elite are underlined and carried further by the fact of their increasingly common educational routine.

Overwhelmingly college graduates, substantial proportions have attended Ivy League colleges, although the education of the higher military, of course, differs from that of other members of the power elite. . . . The inner core of the power elite consists, first, of those who interchange commanding roles at the top of one dominant institutional order with those in another: the admiral who is also a banker and a lawyer and who heads up an important federal commission; the corporation executive whose company was one of the two or three leading war material producers who is now the Secretary of Defense; the wartime general who dons civilian clothes to sit on the political directorate and then becomes a member of the board of directors of a leading economic corporation. Although the executive who becomes a general, the general who becomes a statesman, the statesman who becomes a banker, see much more than ordinary men in their ordinary environments, still the perspectives of even such men often remain tied to their dominant locales. In their very career, however, they interchange roles within the big three and thus readily transcend the particularity of interest in any one of these institutional milieux. By their very careers and activities, they lace the three types of milieux together. They are, accordingly, the core members of the power elite. (Pp. 269-297)

The Power Elite brought to social and political analysis a new perspective on social relationships and how they define the structures of political power in

society. The idea that segments of society form ruling elites has a history reaching back in history to before Plato and Aristotle. Mills, however, explained how power elites operate in society in general, and he painted a graphic and detailed portrait of the American power structure as it existed in the 1950s.

While Mills examined many social and political issues, his major objective was to explore the social and political forces that make things happen in society. As a sociology student, your attempts to analyze social issues and events will probably not be as all-encompassing or far-reaching as Mills's. However, your social issue analysis paper will have the same general goal that Mills's study had: to help readers understand social processes. Furthermore, your paper will have a more specific primary objective: to apply the techniques of sociological analysis to a specific social issue or problem.

Determining your audience. Before writing your paper, consider your audience. For whom are you writing? When you write a social issue paper, your audience consists of the following:

- The instructor of the course, who wants you to analyze carefully and insightfully, and write well
- College students and others who study sociology, who want to improve their chances of success in their careers, or who simply want to better understand the social and political process in order to affect events or teach sociology to others
- Yourself

Keep all three audiences in mind as you write. It is sometimes difficult to determine how much background material or how much basic discussion of an important but tangential subject you should include in an analysis. What would one of your classmates need to know about your topic to understand your thesis? A clear understanding of your paper's purpose will help you to pinpoint your audience and tailor your material accordingly.

9.2.2 Writing Social Issue Analysis Papers

There are four basic steps in writing a good social issue analysis paper. These steps are recursive, meaning that although they must all be undertaken, they need not necessarily be taken consecutively, and some of them will be taken repeatedly:

1. Select a social issue to study.
2. Narrow the focus of your study.
3. Conduct your research.
4. Write the paper.

Selecting an issue to study. In most cases, your teacher will ask you to select an issue that is germane to the course. For example, in a course on the family as a social institution, you might choose to write on a topic like one of these:

- The Future of "Traditional Families" in America
- Problems of Two-Paycheck Families
- Current Challenges for African-American Families
- Special Needs of Single-Parent Families

In a course in majority-minority relations you might write on one of the following topics:

- The Melting Pot vs. Multiculturalism
- Assimilating Native Americans into Mainstream American Culture
- Racial Discrimination in the Media
- Sexual Harassment in the Workplace
- Women of Color in the Feminist Movement

While it is not a requirement, personal experience or interest can sometimes help you decide which issue to write about. For example, you may want to do a paper on some issue related to your vocational aspirations. If you are planning to be a teacher, you could investigate the quality of public education in the United States or, more specifically, in your state or district. An aspiring athlete could study a particular aspect of U.S. Olympic policy or the "gloried self" problem faced by superstar athletes described by Adler and Adler (1989). A future physician may want to look at problems in medical reimbursement or the trend toward socialized medicine. Since government policy affects every vocational interest to some degree, you may find a topic by asking yourself: "What are my career goals and interests? In what way does government affect me?" Many college students, for example, are affected by government student loan policies and the issue of an income tax deduction for college tuition.

Where you have been and what you have done in your life are important, and if you are or have been personally involved with your topic, you gain more than knowledge. Your paper becomes an experiential tool; it expands your vision and increases the options available to you. By writing a good paper on some "personal" issue, you not only contribute to your success in the class and the available knowledge on the topic, but also broaden your understanding of the life you are living.

Another general approach to finding a topic is to select a current event. Newspapers, popular magazines, and television and radio reports continually present actual problems that are meaningful issues for sociology students to investigate. Issues related to drugs, gang violence, poverty, quality of education, abortion, and religious practices are to be found in the news every day. Scan the pages of your local newspaper or read the entries in the news digest of your Internet service, and you will find many topics to write about.

Narrowing the focus for your social issue paper. With assistance from your instructor, you should be able to narrow the issue and select a specific topic that is right for you. For example, the news is filled with reports on gangs and gang behavior, which can easily translate into many meaningful topics, including the following:

The Role Gangs Play in Replacing Family Values
 Gangs and Violence in New York City
 Gangs, Drugs, and Minority Self-Concept

Suppose that you select the family as the general issue area that you would like to study. You can narrow your topic by selecting a specific focus for your paper:

Definitional focus: What is the traditional family, and how does it differ from other forms of family organization?

Geographic focus: What is family life like in Concord, New Hampshire? Is it different from family life in Papua, New Guinea?

Historical focus: How has the family changed over time?

Systems focus: How does the traditional family as an American institution interact with other basic systems or institutions in society, such as churches, schools, or government agencies?

Interaction focus: What are the roles played in the family? What social, economic, political, or environmental forces affect these roles?

Future focus: What does the future hold for the family? What can be projected from what you have learned about the issue?

9.2.3 Contents of a Social Issue Analysis Paper

Your social issue analysis paper should contain the following elements. The format for each is described in Chapter 3 of this manual:

- Title page
- Abstract, outline, or table of contents—ask your instructor which of these to include
- Body or text, which includes source citations
- References
- Appendixes (where applicable)

The following sample social issue analysis paper (starting on page 167) was written by a student in a Social Stratification class at the University of Central Oklahoma. You may use it as a model for writing your paper.

SAMPLE SOCIAL ISSUE ANALYSIS PAPER

Aspects of Social Stratification in the
 Access and Use of Computers and the Internet

by

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for

Social Stratification 4443

Section 23870

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November 20, 2004

SAMPLE SOCIAL ISSUE ANALYSIS PAPER (CONT.)

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SAMPLE SOCIAL ISSUE ANALYSIS PAPER (CONT.)

Abstract

Aspects of Social Stratification in the Access
and Use of Computers and the Internet

The growth of computer and Internet use has occurred unevenly among the various social identity groups. Primarily due to the high cost of computers at the beginning of our Information Age, wealthier white members of society led the way in adopting the new technology. Low-income, minority, and rural and central-city individuals were slow to acquire computers and the skills to use them, and this discrepancy has been described as the *digital divide*.

Beginning in 1995 the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) has conducted studies tracking the growth of computer and Internet use. Since 1995 the divide has narrowed as the cost of computers has come down and connecting to the Internet has become easier. A divide still exists, however, which various government and corporate programs are attempting to address.

Emerging as a new kind of divide is the debate over the use of computers and the Internet in government elections. While this divide is not based on socioeconomic differences, many voters are expressing a lack of confidence in the accuracy of computer-based voting. There exists a robust debate over whether computers are appropriate for elections, given the ability to "hack" computers and the lack of a paper trail in this type of voting. The increasing lack of voter confidence is termed the *allegiant divide*—a growing chasm between the government and the governed.

There is a digital divide, but how wide that chasm is depends on what aspect of society one examines. Computer and Internet use is still relatively young, and this topic will continue to be the subject of study for many years to come.

SAMPLE SOCIAL ISSUE ANALYSIS PAPER (CONT.)

THE PROBLEM

The Digital Divide

The proliferation of computers over the past twenty years and the growth of the Internet over the past ten years have spawned a new aspect of social stratification known as the *digital divide*. Individuals who lack access to computers and the Internet are said to experience "information poverty" as they are unable to use computers to access banking, seek jobs, communicate with friends, or retrieve other information (Facer and Furlong 2001).

Many studies have examined differences in computer skills and access to the Internet between the *haves* and the *have nots*, focusing on the disparity of levels of access and use among different income and ethnic groups, gender, education levels, and geographic locations.

Socioeconomic Status

A series of studies by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) of the U.S. Department of Commerce have concluded that access to computers and the Internet is directly related to socioeconomic status (Clark and Gorski 2002). Those in lower economic brackets not only disproportionately lack ownership of computers and the skills to operate them but have also shouldered the brunt of job displacement as robots have been deployed on assembly lines and for other workplace uses.

Low-income students who lack computers at home are likely to attend schools that do not have computers or Internet connection (Clark and Gorski 2002). The divide between students in poorer schools and those in wealthier schools is aggravated by the fact that many of the wealthier schools offer after-hours access to computers to students even though they are more likely to have access at home. Low-income students without computer access at school are also deprived of the experience at home.

SAMPLE SOCIAL ISSUE ANALYSIS PAPER (CONT.)

In 1997 the President's Committee of Advisors on Science and Technology (1997) set as a goal that schools should have a student-to-computer ratio of 4 or 5 to 1. A 2000 federally funded study found that the average school had reached a 5 to 1 ratio, but the poorest schools had 9 students per computer (NCES 2001). Despite efforts to increase access to computers and the Internet, there still exists a large gap in computer access between students from households with incomes under \$15,000 and students from households with higher incomes (Clark and Gorski 2002).

Ethnicity

According to the NTIA (2000), Internet and computer use increased for all social identity groups between 1998 and 2000, but the increase of use by racial or ethnic groups still lagged behind when considered by gender, income, and geographic location. During this period Asian American households had the highest rate of access at 56.8%, while white households had the second highest rate of access at 46.1%. Black and Hispanic households had the lowest Internet penetration rates at 23.5% and 23.6% respectively for the same two-year period. It is interesting to note that no projections were made for American Indians, Aleuts, and Eskimos because the sampled populations were too small to generate credible results.

Gender

By 2000 the gap between male and female use of computers and the Internet became virtually indistinguishable. The NTIA (2000) found that 44.6% of men and 44.2% of women used computers and the Internet in the year 2000. Although the gender gap appears to have been closed, there are interesting differences between males and females when age is considered. The NTIA (2000) found that younger boys and girls had equal use of the Internet. Women used the Internet more than men of college age and during the prime working age. Finally, when older adults were surveyed, men were more likely to use the Internet.

SAMPLE SOCIAL ISSUE ANALYSIS PAPER (CONT.)

Low-Literate Adults

The most significant barrier to low-literate adults using the Internet is that the content on the Web is written at a 10th grade reading level, while at least half of the U.S. population reads at an 8th grade level or below (Zarcadoolas, Blanco, and Boyer 2002). This barrier is borne out in the federal *Falling through the Net* studies, which reported that adults with only an elementary school education had a 4% Internet use, compared to a 74.5% Internet use for adults with at least a bachelor's or higher degree (NTIA 2000).

Even as the gap in access to the Internet is narrowing for most demographic groups, low-literate adults still face navigation barriers once they do go on-line. Working to make Internet navigation easier for people with physical and visual disabilities, the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) has designed clearer links and graphics that also help those with lower levels of education (Zarcadoolas et al. 2000).

Geographical Location

Two geographic areas have traditionally been underserved with respect to telephone and computer access. The first *Falling through the Net* report by NTIA (1995) discovered that the "most disadvantaged in terms of absolute computer and modem penetration are the most enthusiastic users of on-line services that facilitate economic uplift and empowerment" (p. 3).

Rural areas and inner-city areas lag behind the rest of the country, but the gap is closing somewhat (NTIA 2000). The national telecommunication policy of universal service was once centered strictly on telephone access, but now the debate has reconfigured itself to determine whether the policy should include Internet service (Gillett 2000). One barrier to Internet use that people in rural areas have experienced is an inability to connect with a service provider as a local call.

Prior to changes in telecommunication laws in 1996, people in rural areas had to make long distance calls to connect to the Internet. New laws taking effect in

SAMPLE SOCIAL ISSUE ANALYSIS PAPER (CONT.)

1996 created "expanded area service," or flat-rate calling zones, which allowed people in rural areas to connect their modems to service providers in a more populated area (Nicholas 2003).

The federal *Falling through the Net* report of 2000 indicates that rural areas made significant increases in penetration of Internet use but that central-city penetration fell behind other parts of the country (NTIA 2000). The lack of telephone subscribership in inner-city areas explains why those in a lower socioeconomic status are also underrepresented in terms of use of Internet services.

AN OPPOSING VIEW OF THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Not everyone is convinced that the so-called digital divide is real, or if it does exist, that it matters. Michael Powell, the current chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, believes the notion of a digital divide is an "ill-advised version of the 'Mercedes divide' in the United States" (Strover 2003:275). Powell's view is that some people can afford luxury cars and others cannot, but those without a Mercedes are not necessarily at a disadvantage. Others who believe a divide once existed have come to believe that the gap in the use of technology has narrowed for some groups, such as those identified by ethnicity and income, and has been eliminated between men and women (Servon 2002).

Servon (2002) suggests there are *four myths about the digital divide* that need to be debunked in order for the nation to formulate appropriate information technology policies: The first is that providing access to computers and the Internet will eliminate the digital divide. She states that the phenomenon of the digital divide has been narrowly defined as a problem of access and that even though people have access to the technology not much else changes. She points out that those who use computers for low-order tasks such as word processing still do not benefit in our information age to the same extent as those who use

SAMPLE SOCIAL ISSUE ANALYSIS PAPER (CONT.)

computers for higher-order tasks such as data analysis and design. The second myth is that technology can solve social problems. Servon (2002) states that . . .

although the potential of [Internet technology] to create opportunities for disadvantaged groups must be pursued aggressively, there must also be a pragmatic assessment about what it can and cannot do. Technology alone will not level deep-seated historical inequalities. (P. 225)

The third is that on-line communication diminishes the need for personal contact. She believes that both virtual and face-to-face interactions are mutually reinforcing. Increasing computer skills help people form new relationships that can help them attain resources to move out of poverty. The final myth is that information technology levels spatial inequalities. Servon (2002) points out that even though the Internet allows people to access information from around the world, the technology is still rooted in geography. The telecommunication infrastructure's penetration is much greater in wealthier areas than in rural or poor urban areas; the same areas that can be classified as poor areas also "suffer from information poverty" (p. 226).

There have been many programs, both public and private, to increase the availability of computers in schools, libraries, and community centers. With the burgeoning availability of technology, the public debate has shifted from the digital divide to digital opportunities. Physical access to computers and the Internet may have improved for everyone, but there still appears to be a divide in the skills people have in the use of technology at home and in the workplace (Strover 2003).

THE SECOND-LEVEL DIGITAL DIVIDE

Over the past five years the availability of computers in schools has grown considerably. Nationally, public schools had nearly one computer for every four students, and almost all classrooms are connected to the Internet (Samuelson 2002). It appears that access to computers and the Internet is growing for all classes of people, but there still exists a disparity of skills in using the technology.

SAMPLE SOCIAL ISSUE ANALYSIS PAPER (CONT.)

With a steady increase in the number of people having access to the Internet, some scholars have moved beyond measuring the difference between those who are connected and those who are not. Studies are beginning to measure inequalities in the level of skills people have when using computers and the Internet (Hargittai 2002). Moving to the study of skills as opposed to mere access to information technology serves to better demonstrate how the technology is used. It is one thing to have physical access to computers, but without the skills to use the technology, effectively a digital divide still exists.

In a study of the second-level digital divide, Hargittai (2002) found that young people could navigate the Internet better than older people, and that those with more education were more adept at using computers. Her study showed that on-line skills between males and females are nearly equal. She concluded that public policies to increase access to the Internet need to have a parallel policy of increasing training, and stated that ". . . like education in general, it is not enough to give people a book, we also have to teach them how to read in order to make it useful" (p. 14).

EFFORTS TO CLOSE THE GAP

Despite the Internet barriers experienced by the poor, the less educated, those in rural and inner cities, and minorities, there are many programs active in the United States to close the digital divide. Most notable among various programs are the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which has linked more than 7,000 libraries in the United States and Canada (Sargent 2004). Another effort to narrow the information gap is the creation of community technology centers. The first such center was opened in 1983 in New York City Harlem by Antonio Stone to provide personal computer training for low-income people. There are now more than 4,000 technology centers in the United States to boost computer and Internet access to those who otherwise would still be part of the divide (Sargent 2004).

SAMPLE SOCIAL ISSUE ANALYSIS PAPER (CONT.)

In a March 2002 speech to the trustees of the Greenwich Library in Greenwich, Connecticut, William Harrison (2002), the CEO of J. P. Morgan Chase & Company, discussed closing the digital divide as part of a response to the third Information Revolution. He pointed out the first Information Revolution was over 5,000 years old—the invention of the written language. He went on to say that the second Information Revolution began with the invention of Gutenberg's printing press. The third Information Revolution, Harrison said, was the creation of the Internet.

Harrison's (2002) company created a program to close the digital divide known as Our Neighborhood Digital Education Community, or ON_DEC. The project put a computer with Internet access in the homes of 1,300 students and all 300 faculty and staff (including janitors) of Ditmas Intermediate School in Brooklyn, a school serving a poor neighborhood. The results were positive. In addition to fostering a new sense of being connected among students and teachers, the project contributed to many positive changes in the school. Prior to the installation of the computers, the school experienced a 20% rate of students transferring to other schools. By the next year, after ON_DEC was launched, only 15% of students transferred to other schools, and after the first full year of the project that number dropped to about 12%. Disciplinary problems dropped by 58% during the same period. Harrison (2002) noted that "... maybe all this isn't so amazing, after all. When people see a real opportunity to improve their own lives, they will seize it with both hands" (p. 25).

A NEW KIND OF DIVIDE: USING COMPUTERS IN ELECTIONS

The controversy of the presidential election of 2000 has given rise to a new kind of divide with respect to computers and information technology. As a result of counting errors blamed on punch card ballots with their "hanging and dimpled chads," there has been considerable debate over whether computers and even Internet voting ought to replace all other methods of electing government officials.

Proponents of using computers for voting give three basic arguments for electronic voting: (1) it will increase participation; (2) it will enhance administrative

SAMPLE SOCIAL ISSUE ANALYSIS PAPER (CONT.)

efficiency; and (3) it is the logical next step in voting technology. Given that voter turnout has been declining since 1960, they argue that the enthusiasm younger people have for computers and the Internet is likely to increase voter participation, especially if voting is allowed over the Internet so people will not have to go to a traditional polling place to cast their votes. They also say that using computers can reduce the cost of elections, since computers can tally vote totals in seconds rather than hours, as happens when totals taken from mechanical voting machines must be transcribed by hand, and they claim that computer voting will eliminate counting errors and make it easier for voters to make their selections. And they argue that our election system already uses electronic technology in creating voter rolls and ballot counting (in the case of scanning machines). They say that the possibility of election fraud is not sufficient enough to abandon the idea of electronic voting given that fraud has always been present, even when paper ballots have been used. And they point out that every new method of voting encounters resistance (Gibson 2001–2002).

Opponents of electronic voting say that the digital divide promotes discrimination against the poor and minorities. Gibson (2001–2002) points out that even though government reports claim that the divide is closing, there is still a significant gap among the poor and those in inner cities. Opponents of electronic voting also point to the security of the computers themselves. A component of computer voting is the use of "smart cards" that identify individual voters. The smart cards must be inserted into a computer to allow voting, but opponents fear that these cards have the ability to be programmed to allow voters to cast more than one vote (Hulme 2004). Perhaps the most vehement argument against using computers for voting is that the computers do not provide a paper trail that can be used in the event of a recount (Hulme 2004). Recounts will be a practice of the past since the vote totals will be exactly the same every time a total function is entered on the computer. Colorado recently decided not to use computers for voting until the issue has been further debated on the national level. Upon debating legislation regarding computer

SAMPLE SOCIAL ISSUE ANALYSIS PAPER (CONT.)

use, the Colorado legislature decided that, absent a paper trail, the state will wait for a federal law providing standards that address security issues (Brown 2004).

At present voters lack confidence in voting computers and doubt that election results will be the true will of the people. This chasm might well give rise to voters feeling more and more distant from their government, a chasm that can be described as the *allegiant divide*.

CONCLUSIONS

From a conflict or institutional perspective (Rothman 2005), the digital divide appears to extend the gap between the *haves* and the *have nots*. Attempts to ameliorate this gap have met with mixed reviews. Although the distance between male and female computer and Internet use has all but vanished, the gap between those in the lower and upper socioeconomic strata may be widening. Those embracing the order perspective (Rothman 2005) might conclude that this is simply a manifestation of one major function of social stratification—finding and training the most talented individuals to fill those positions ranked as most important by society. However, from a conflict perspective this widening gap is another reality of the oppression experienced by the poor and others in lower socioeconomic strata.

Continuous studies will have to determine where the most significant divides are in terms of universal use of computers and the Internet. Where the divide appears to be closing, further study needs to be done in terms of the skills that each demographic group brings to the task of computing, information retrieval, and communication. The development of computer voting also deserves extensive study as the debate over accuracy and voter confidence continues. In the final of their seven-part series on the digital divide, Clark and Gorski (2003) conclude that . . .

. . . it is crucial that both multicultural education and digital divide researchers . . . recognize that efforts to altogether eliminate the digital divide must be understood as but one part of a larger effort to eradicate the persistence and proliferation of inequity in every aspect of education and society. (P. 32)

SAMPLE SOCIAL ISSUE ANALYSIS PAPER (CONT.)

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CHAPTER

10

CRITICAL EVALUATION
OF SOCIOLOGICAL LITERATURE

10.1 BOOK REVIEWS

10.1.1 *The Objective of a Book Review*

Successful book reviewers answer two questions for their readers: What is the book trying to do? How well is it doing it? People who read a book review want to know if a particular book is worth reading, for their own particular purposes, before buying or beginning to read it. These potential book readers want to know what a book is about, and the book's strengths and weaknesses, and they want to gain this information as easily and quickly as possible.

Your goal in writing a book review, therefore, is to help people decide efficiently whether to buy or read a book. Your immediate objectives may be to please your instructor and get a good grade, but these objectives are most likely to be met if you focus on a book review's audience: people who want help in selecting books to read. In the process of writing a review according to the guidelines given in this chapter, you will also learn about the following:

- The book you are reviewing and its content
- Professional standards for book reviews in sociology
- The essential steps to reviewing books that apply in any academic discipline

This final objective, learning to review a book properly, has more applications than you may at first imagine. First, it helps you to focus quickly on the essential elements of a book, to draw from a book its informational value for yourself and others. Some of the most successful professional and business people speed-read many books. They read these books less for enjoyment than to assimilate knowledge quickly. These readers then apply this knowledge to substantial advantage in their professions. It is normally not wise to speed-read a book you are