



DEBUNKING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

It may turn out that the “digital divide” one of the most fashionable political slogans of recent years is largely fiction. As you will recall, the argument went well beyond the unsurprising notion that the rich would own more computers than the poor. The disturbing part of the theory was that society was dividing itself into groups of technology “haves” and “have nots” and that this segregation would, in turn, worsen already large economic inequalities. It’s this argument that either untrue or wildly exaggerated.

We should always have been suspicious. After all, computers have spread quickly, precisely because they’ve become cheaper to buy and easier to use. Falling prices and skill requirements suggest that the digital divide would spontaneously shrink - and so it has.

The Census Bureau’s latest survey of computer use reports narrowing gaps among different income and ethnic groups. In 1997 only 37 percent of people in families with incomes from \$15,000 to \$24,999 used computers at home or at work. By September 2001, that proportion was 47 percent. Over the same period, usage among families with incomes exceeding \$75,000 rose more modestly, from 81 percent to 88 percent.

Among all racial and ethnic groups, computer use is rising. Here are the numbers for 2001 compared with similar rates for 1997: Asian-Americans, 71 percent (58 percent in 1997); whites, 70 percent (58 percent); blacks, 56 percent (44 percent); Hispanics, 49 percent (38 percent).

The new figures confirm common sense: many computer skills aren’t especially high tech or demanding. The point-and-click technology allows computers to be adopted to many business and home uses without requiring people to become computer experts. Just as you can drive a car without being a mechanic, you can use a computer without being a software engineer.

Now, a new study further discredits the digital divide. The study, by economists David Card of the University of California, Berkeley, and John DiNardo of the University of Michigan, challenges the notion that computers have significantly worsened wage inequality. The logic of how this supposedly happens is straightforward.

Computers (the logic holds) raise the demand for high-skilled workers, increasing their wages. Meanwhile, computerization by automating many routine tasks reduces the demand for low-skilled workers and, thereby, their wages. The gap between the two widens. Economic inequality increases.

Superficially, wage statistics support the theory. Consider the ratio between workers near the top of the wage distribution (at the

90th percentile) and those near the bottom (at the 10th percentile). In 1999, the first earned \$26.05 an hour and the second, \$6.05 an hour, reports the Economic Policy Institute in Washington. The ratio of the two workers at the top compared to workers at the bottom was 4.3 to 1. By contrast, the ratio in 1980 was only 3.7 to 1. Computerization increased; so did the wage gap. Case closed.

But wait, say Card and DiNardo. The trouble with blaming computers is that the worsening of inequality occurred primarily in the early 1980s. In 1986, the ratio of the high-to-low paid worker was also 4.3; the same as in 1999. With computer use growing, the wage gap should have continued to expand, if it was being driven by a shifting demand for skills. Indeed, Card and DiNardo find much detailed evidence that contradicts the theory. They conclude that computerization doesn’t explain “the rise in U.S. wage inequality in the last quarter of the 20th century.”

Of course, not all economists accept this brushoff. To Lawrence Katz of Harvard, the spread of computers does promote wage inequality. But few economists have ever believed that new technology is the only influence on inequality, he argues. It can be overwhelmed by other forces. For poor workers, he contends that the economic boom of the 1990s offset the depressing effect of computers on their wages: “Firms were searching high and low for new workers and they bid up the wages of the unskilled.”

Either way, the popular perception of computers’ impact on wages is hugely overblown. Lots of other influences count for as much, or more. The worsening of wage inequality in the early 1980s, for example, almost certainly reflected the deep 1981-82

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Editor: Greg Swensen ☎ 9370 0357 (W)

Email: gswensen@central.murdoch.edu.au

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WA BRANCH OFFICE

PO Box 198, West Perth

Western Australia 6872

☎ 9420 7240

Fax: 9310 3936

Email: aaswwa@highway1.com.au

Executive Officer: Meredith Doyle

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NATIONAL OFFICE

PO Box 4956, Kingston ACT 2604

☎ 02 6273 0199 Fax: 02 6273 5020

Membership inquiries only (Freecall): ☎ 1800 630 124

<http://www.aasw.asn.au/>

AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS - WESTERN AUSTRALIAN BRANCH

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Mary Joyce ☎ 9346 4671 (W)

Sarah Kemp ☎ 0408 944 188 (W)

Francis Lynch ☎ 9442 3444 (W)

Dawn Mielins ☎ 9022 0714 (W)

Rosina Pruiti ☎ 9274 9411 (W)

Michele Speed ☎ 9432 3333 (W)

Representatives on External Bodies

Combined Health Professions Association

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WA Council of Social Services

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South West Regional

Contact: Tracey Turner ☎ 9727 2330

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Project Officer: Cindy Gorton ☎ 9420 7240 (W)

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recession and the fall of inflation. Companies found it harder to raise prices. To survive, they concluded that they had to hold down the wages of their least skilled, least mobile and youngest workers. High joblessness allowed them to do so. In 1982, unemployment averaged 9.7 percent.

As a slogan, the "digital divide" brilliantly united a concern for the poor with a faith in technology. It also suggested an agenda: put computers in schools; connect classrooms to the Internet. Well, the agenda has been largely realized. By 2000, public schools had roughly one computer for every four students.

Almost all schools were connected to the Internet, as were about three quarters of classrooms. Some students get computer skills that they might miss. Among 10 to 17 year-old students from homes with less than \$15,000 of income, about half use computers only at school, reports the Census Bureau.

But whether education and students' life prospects have improved is a harder question. As yet, computers haven't produced broad gains in test scores. As for today's computer skills, they may not be terribly important, in part because technology constantly changes.

Frank Levy, an economist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who studies how computers alter work, emphasizes the importance of basic reading and reasoning abilities. Often, new computer skills can be taught in a few weeks. But people have to be able to read manuals and follow instructions.

The 'digital divide' suggested a simple solution (computers) for a complex problem (poverty). With more computer access, the poor could escape their lot. But computers never were the source of anyone's poverty and, as for escaping, what people do for themselves matters more than what technology can do for them.

Article by Robert J Samuelson reprinted in MSNBC, 25 March 2002 <<http://www.msnbc.com/news/>>

WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS FOR SOCIAL WORK DAY?

Social Work Day
8 May 2002

- Celebrate your profession, your selves and your colleagues.
- Get involved and celebrate *Social Work Day!*
- Celebrate within your community, work or area.
- Come to the events planned around and on *Social Work Day*.

We have 'party packs' (posters, stickers etc) available for anyone holding an event so just call us for information, packs, ideas or details of events happening in your area.

Also please let us know what you have planned so that we can put it on our calendar and you can let everyone know what it is you are doing.

WA Branch contact: Meredith Doyle 9420 7240 or aasw@highway1.com.au
National Office: 02 6273 0199

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PUBLICATION AND DEADLINE DATES FOR THE WEST AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL WORKER

Issue	Deadline	Posted
May 2002	19 April	6 May
June 2002	17 May	3 June
July 2002	14 June	1 July
August 2002	19 July	5 August
September 2002	16 August	2 September
October 2002	20 September	7 October
November 2002	18 October	4 November
December 2002	15 November	2 December

Naomi Feil

Executive Director, Validation Training Institute, Cleveland, Ohio

Presents -

The Role of Validation Therapy in Dementia Management

Melbourne: 27 August 2002

Hobart: 28 August 2002

Perth: 30 August 2002

Darwin: 2 September 2002

Sydney: 4 September 2002

(Also workshops in New Zealand prior to Australian tour)

"Validation is based on an attitude of respect and empathy for older adults with Alzheimer's type dementia who are struggling to resolve unfinished business before they die." (Feil N, 1996, The validation breakthrough)

**Registration information from
Validation Therapy Resource & Training Centre
PO Box 1141, Surrey Hills North, Victoria 3127
Fax: 03 9888 4968, Tel: 03 9888 4968
Mobile: 0411 240 479
Email: stewartjohns@bigpond.com.au**

/HWWHUV

Mr. Noel Lockyer-Stevens
Acting Director
Metropolitan Mental Health Service

Dear Mr. Lockyer-Stevens,

I am aware that the roles and functions of the Office of Chief Psychiatrist and newly created Office of Mental Health Services are currently being reviewed by the Department of Health as part of the HARD review.

On behalf of the Australian Association of Social Workers, West Australian Branch (AASW/WA), I commend the inclusion of a social work representative for the Clinical Strategic Group process.

The selection of a social worker to represent the profession is, of course, of great importance to the AASW/WA. As the acknowledged professional body for social workers with a membership nation wide of 6000 and in WA of in excess of 800 members, the AASW/WA has maintained an ongoing interest in regard to mental health issues and services in a range of ways.

One of the key ways is through the existence of one of our professional sub-committees, the Mental Health Subcommittee.

Additionally as a profession, the AASW has acknowledged the critical importance of mental health service delivery and the role of social workers in that service delivery through the development,

at the national level, of a specific set of Competencies for Social Workers who are mental health practitioners.

Given this Association's particular interest in mental health, we would be pleased to provide appropriate input into the selection of the social work representative as part of your review.

It is of particular importance to the AASW that the social worker chosen to represent the profession is an AASW member, liaises with the AASW Mental Health Subcommittee and in addition to the specific clinical and strategic competencies you require, is also familiar with strategic issues for the mental health field and the social work profession.

Thank you for your consideration. Should you wish to discuss any matter further, please contact me through the AASW's Executive Officer on Ph: 9332 0019 or at my office at Family and Children's Services on Ph: 9350 7222.

In anticipation

Dr. Barbara J. Meddin MAASW Acc
President
6 March 2002

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9 April Tuesday

Communicating with Children

Presenter: Suzanne Jenkins.

Branch event.

One day workshop. Numbers are limited so call ASAP to check availability of position.

Contact: Executive Officer 9332 0019

10 April Wednesday

Women and Insanity

Presenter: Assoc Prof Kristjana Kristiansen from Trondheim, Norway.

Branch event

Evening lecture. All welcome

Contact: Executive Officer 9332 0019

15-16 April 2002

WACOSS Conference

From little things big things grow

Contact: WACOSS 9420 7200 or www.wacoss.org.au

3 May Friday

Local Aboriginal sites of significance. An opportunity to learn more of the history and Aboriginal sites of significance in southern Perth and how often they are used today.

Branch event

Contact: Executive Officer 9332 0019

5 May Sunday

The Walyabup Trail

Bibra Lake

You are invited to learn more of the Aboriginal experience living in the heart of Perth.

Branch event

Contact: Executive Officer 9332 0019

8 May

Social Work Day public lecture

Social work and activism

Assoc Professor Tony Cooke

McDonald Lecture Theatre, Princess Margaret Hospital

Contact: Executive Officer 9332 0019

29 September & 2 October 2002

AASWWE & AASW WA Joint conference

Working across borders

Stretch your mind: Strengthen your practice

The nexus between practice and education

AASW WA project Officer: Cindy Gorton

Email: Jonandcindy@bigpond.com; Tel 9420 7240

AASWWE co-ordinator Fran Crawford

Email: f.crawford@curtin.edu.au

2-6 October 2004

International social work conference in Adelaide

IFSW, IASSW, AASW, AASWWE

Global Social Work 2004. Reclaiming civil society

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Contact

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Clin member & approved supervisor American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy

The Lake Centre

79 Gregory Street, Wembley WA 6014

Tel: 9382 4772, Mobile: 0438 184 418

PUBLIC INQUIRY IMPERATIVE

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) called today for the establishment of a public, independent inquiry into Commonwealth government treatment of asylum seekers.

“The continued exploitation of vulnerable people for political advantage must be stopped” Jo Gaha, National President of the AASW, said today. “Over the past weeks, two serious allegations against asylum seekers – that parents sewed their children’s lips together at Woomera, and callously threw their children into the ocean from a boat – have been revealed as absolutely untrue. The vilification of people who have no right of reply should concern all Australians.”

This vilification coincides with a lack of public information on the deaths of two women in a boat off Ashmore Reef in November 2001, when there were Australian navy and customs vessels close by. When will the facts surrounding their deaths be made public?

Despite widespread misinformation the Australian people are realising that current policies purporting to deal with asylum seekers are both unacceptable and unworkable. “A rethinking of the policy framework is needed urgently and the best way to achieve it will be through an independent inquiry,” Jo Gaha said.

The inquiry must be properly constituted and provided with:

Clear terms of reference

The power to require attendance of all relevant witnesses

The power to require furnishing of all relevant documents

The Australia public has never reacted well to being fed misinformation and want to know what happened and why.

Media release 4 March 2002

The Milton H. Erickson Institute of Western Australia 2002 Workshops

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BREAST CANCER SITE [HTTP://WWW.THEBREASTCANCERSITE.COM/HOME](http://www.thebreastcancersite.com/home)

The Breast Cancer Site has re-emerged under new ownership, and with your help, it will continue to provide hope to women who would not otherwise receive the gift of early detection -- the key to survival of breast cancer.

43,000 women will die from breast cancer this year. In seconds and at no cost, you can help give underprivileged women the life-saving gift of early detection. Visit The Breast Cancer Site every day to fund free mammograms and help us reduce the number of mothers, sisters, partners and friends lost to breast cancer.

Funding for mammography screening, paid for by site sponsors, is generated when you click on the "Fund Free Mammograms" button on the home page of The Breast Cancer Site.

With your help, the lives of over 2,000 underprivileged women will be touched in 2002 thanks to funding generated at the Breast Cancer Site.

Please visit the Breast Cancer Site daily and spread the word to your friends and family!

What the Branch Has Been Doing On Your Behalf In Social Policy

I have just had the opportunity to meet with my colleague at national office, Sarah Horden. Sarah is the National Policy Officer and is responsible for a number of AASW areas including social policy issues.

At the moment, national office has four subcommittees under social policy which address rural and remote issues, mental health, indigenous alliance and welfare reform. Sarah is also working on several position papers with the subcommittees which will be made available to members on their completion.

Whilst in Canberra, Sarah and I also discussed the national strategic plan, the asylum seeker/refugee issue and media strategies for the Association.

In addition, I was made aware that the New South Wales branch are working on registration of social workers and have made some significant progress toward this. Our branch anticipates some sharing of information with New South Wales and their relevant documents to assist our own work in the area.

The following submissions and outgoing letters were worked on or completed.

Allied Health Taskforce on Workforce Issues by the state health and disability departments was completed and sent. The Administrators in Health subcommittee provided information for the AASW (WA) response which was quite detailed and comprehensive.

Met with Sharon McFarlane, a Team Leader at *ASeTTs* who have a program working with refugee families leaving detention. *ASeTTs* have been able to provide a wealth of information on how families and individuals cope with life after detention and on their experiences during detention. This feedback will be used for the AASW submission for the children in detention HREOC inquiry. National office will be responding to the inquiry as well and are also seeking a public inquiry into the "vilification of asylum seekers" by the federal government.

I received and read the *Coroner's report in to the death of Susan Taylor* which has been one of the instigators for the Gordon Inquiry. The Children's Interest Subcommittee will be discussing the issues the inquiry is investigating and I will also be collating information from members who have experience and knowledge in the area.

The WA branch responded to the WACOSS *Housing and Sustainable Communities Indicator Project* with information from our response to the Homelessness Taskforce paper in December 2001.

Members, if you have any specific questions about any of the issues I have raised, please feel free to email me at blitz-cokis@iinet.net.au.

KATHY BLITZ-COKIS
SOCIAL POLICY OFFICER
AASW (WA BRANCH)

Branch Submission to Department of Health Review of the Acts Amendment (Abortion) Act 1998

The AASW (WA Branch) is committed to the enhancement of each person's quality of life and the development of the full potential of each individual. The issue of choice is always a crucial component in quality of life. A social workers' role in this endeavour is often multifaceted, but the pursuit of our commitment always stands to address inequalities and injustices in our society.

The AASW recognises the need to advocate for the right of choice. As such, the current state legislative provisions for a pregnancy termination are heralded as promoting choice within a very complex and controversial area.

The AASW has considered the following areas in the "Terms of Reference" of the Department of Health's Review.

Effectiveness of the "informed consent" provisions in providing women with adequate information and counselling.

Of utmost importance is Section 334 (5) of the Health Act and the offer of "appropriate and adequate counselling" to a woman considering a pregnancy termination. This section provides a holistic approach for a woman whose needs may be more than a medical procedure. It also provides an opportunity for greater recovery in both a social and medical context. The AASW believes that this mandatory requirement to offer "counselling" is an essential component of a woman's short and long-term well-being.

Section 334 of the Health Act 1911 promotes the overarching rights of women facing termination decisions. These rights must not be compromised and the AASW would stress that all women visiting "medical practitioners" must be offered the required information in the relevant circumstances.

The identification of gaps or deficiencies in the delivery and access of abortion and counselling services under the Act.

Aboriginal women, women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and women from our rural areas must be ensured effective service provision. The AASW wishes to promote the special needs these people face on a day-to-day basis with many services they access.

The application of the Health Act within the health sector must be provided within an appropriate geographic, cultural and linguistic context.

The adequacy of the powers of enforcement and the penalties for breaches provided for in the Act.

The inclusion of penalties in the Criminal Code for breaches of Health Act sections relating to pregnancy terminations is somewhat of a contradiction. In encouraging the rights of women and choice, the law simultaneously places the issue into a criminal perspective.

The AASW recognises the need to discourage both harmful and unlawful behaviour, but believes that the essence of the current health legislation would be better promoted in the "rights" and "health" arena alone.

The availability of preventative education and general evidence-based research information for medical practitioners and the community.

The AASW believes in preventative education for contraception at an early age and on the consequences of unwanted children.

The community must be fully aware of the risks and outcomes of the birth of children whose parents do not anticipate their own ability or decision to care for them. As a result, the care of unwanted children is often left to extended family or state services.

The AASW believes that the availability of contraceptive information will help to decrease the number of unwanted pregnancies. In turn, the number of unwanted children may also decrease, along with the jeopardising of their rights to live to their full potential once they are born.

The AASW congratulates the Government on the evaluation of the Act Amendment (Abortion) Act 1998. This is a complex moral area of women's health, right to life and choice and other associated perspectives which must be continually reflected upon and progressed.

**DR. BARBARA MEDDIN MAASW, ACC SW,
PRESIDENT**

Have You Just Graduated?

Don't forget to send a copy of your degree to the AASW National Office, PO Box 4956, Kingston, ACT 2604.

Upon graduation student associate members are eligible to gain full member status of the AASW for the rest of the financial year at no extra cost. To ensure this occurs you need to send a copy of your degree to the National Office.

Remember, next financial year you do not pay the full member fee but the reduced fee in recognition that most new graduates are establishing themselves and often have to pay off fees for their studies. We wish you well in your endeavours.

**EXECUTIVE OFFICER
AASW (WA BRANCH)**