Chapter 1
Information Access, the Digital Divide, and Knowledge-Based Economies: A Comparative Study

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ABSTRACT

The conceptual understanding of the digital divide has been brought to the fore of scholarly research and practice for decades now. The contemporary understanding has been that there is a closer link between information access, the digital divide and knowledge economies. This chapter aims to unpack the 'digital divide' especially as espoused in the developing world context and provide a departure from looking at the digital divide only from the 'information access' perspective. A thorough review of the literature is employed to ascertain the common positions that have been and are being advanced by various renowned researchers in the field and present a comparative study on the effects of the digital divide on the socio-economic setting of South Korea and Zambia. The thesis of this chapter is that the digital divide has contributed to information asymmetry amongst different information-needy individuals and organizations. This is a profound disadvantage, especially in knowledge-based economies. The exponential penetration of technology in people's lives entails that we can no longer passively address the issue of the digital divide but rather must have robust and responsive strategies towards addressing the divide.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has brought to the fore of research opportunities and challenges with regards to organizations' and individuals' access to vital information at any given point in time. The common conceptual understanding is that information is a fuel to competitiveness regardless of activities one is engaged in. Increased usage of ICTs further underpins the establishment of a Knowledge-Based-Economy (KBE) and information society (Frempong, 2011). A KBE has been defined as an economy that is driven by a very

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powerful technological force that is caused by the rapid growth of ICTs (Houghton & Sheehan, 2000; Bhatiasevi, 2010; Kefela, 2010; Phillips, 2013) and the ability to integrate knowledge practices in all the socio-economic hierarchies. The different business processes in the socio-economic value chains of such an economy are driven by knowledge harnessing and deployment. Many countries are encouraged to delve towards KBEs because of the promise of accessing a plethora of socio-economic opportunities and active participation in the world's socio-economic business and competitiveness value chains. This is because it culminates into the creation of quality jobs, encourages income redistribution and therefore poverty alleviation, wealth generation, and is a source of sustainable global competitiveness (Kefela, 2010).

Reviewing the Internet trends and its opportunities as presented in Alexander (2012), it is easy to notice that those who do not have ready access to high-speed ICTs and the Internet have reduced opportunities to higher education and lower income levels, and will generally have trouble competing with those who have ready access to the ICTs and the Internet, and correspondingly to information. For example, the importance of the Internet and ICTs cannot be over-emphasised in developed nations where 21% of economic growth is out of requisite and appropriate access and usage of ICTs (Alexander, 2012). This suffices to mention that ready access to the Internet may likely culminate in increased potential to harness a myriad of opportunities that present themselves in the socio-economic hierarchy. It cannot be over-emphasised that a society significantly secluded from access and realization of the benefits emanating from ICTs is fundamentally insecure and is at peril of social disintegration (Frempong, 2011).

Appreciating that fact, in the near future, most developing world countries will radically pursue their transition from industry based (resource-based) economies to Knowledge-Based-Economies (KBEs). In order for the opportunities of the emerging KBEs to be amassed, there is need to come up with interventions and policies geared towards reducing the digital divide. The drive towards establishments of KBEs has ascended the global development discourse from that hinged on natural resources such as minerals (industry age) to that which focuses on appropriately managing knowledge resources – the information society, where intellectual capital is the main resource (Frempong, 2011). However, all this cannot be achieved if there are rampant levels of the digital divide.

Many authors have attempted to define the digital divide given the context of the environment in which they operate (Campbell, 2001; Mossberger, Tolbert, & Stanbury, 2003; Haddon, 2004; OECD, 2004; Helbig, Gil-García, & Ferro, 2005; Wilson, 2006; Sahraoui, 2007; Wynne & Cooper, 2007; Mancinelli, 2008). The convergence in the definitions reveals that digital divide is the disparity evident in the access to information resources caused by the varying degrees of access and/or usage competence of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Digital divide – inequalities between groups in terms of access or use of ICTs – can be local, regional, national or global. In this chapter we are particularly interested in local and national digital divide. The digital divide can also be described as disparities in accessing opportunities provided by the Internet and ICTs and how this correspondingly culminates into innovation and competitiveness between developed and developing nations (Parker, 2012). Digital divide has been defined as ''the gap between those who do and do not have access to computers and the Internet'' (Van Dijk, 2006, p. 178). Wilson III has defined the digital divide as ''an inequality in access, distribution, and use of information and communication technologies between two or more populations'' (Wilson, 2006, p. 300). Contributing to the definition of the digital divide as access to ICTs and information, Van Dijk (2000) reminded researchers of what a difficult task it was to wholly define the digital divide because 'access' is a multifaceted