

Ethical Implications of the Digital Divide and Social Exclusion: Imperative for Cyber-Security Culture in Africa

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ABSTRACT

Despite that global internet usage continues to expand given the increase in the number of computer ownership and Internet access, a divide persists between information rich and information poor, which is people with lower incomes, education levels, skill and capacity, minorities, as well as those living in rural areas. Building on numerous researches on the digital divide, this study argues for a different set of metaphors by which digital divide should be understood, valued and managed. It examines the understanding that the digital divide is inevitably tied to the concept of social inequalities in every society. With an insight provided for understanding the independent and different layers of the digital divide, a criterion on appropriate approach toward tackling the problem of digital divide is thus supplied. Findings have significant implication for cumulative research on the subject of digital divide in Africa.

KEYWORDS

Africa, Cyber-Security, Digital Divide, Inequality, Internet Access, Poverty, Social Exclusion, Unaffordability

INTRODUCTION

The information society in Africa is experiencing some fundamental ethical problems, whose complexity and global dimensions are rapidly evolving. This is because the use of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) including the Internet has become a prerequisite for living in modern society, having become essential to the functioning of the economy as well as a key driver for development in all sectors (van Dijk, 2005). However, the exponential growth of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and the transformation that this has wrought in all aspects of everyday life has resulted in the emergence of a broad spectrum of problems culminating into social exclusion and digital inequality (Braman, 2006). Additionally, it includes the rapidly evolving threat landscape of the cyberspace which has heightened the extent to which cyberspace vulnerabilities and limited capacities prevent Africa from maximising the benefits of the digital economy (Fox, 2005).

Besides, the people are facing a growing number of uncertainties related to the use of the digital environment such as the digital security threats and incidents that have increased the financial, privacy, and reputational consequences, and in some cases, produce physical damages. Although stakeholders are increasingly aware of these challenges raised by digital security risk, they often approach the problem only from the technical perspective, and in a manner that tends to play down on the ethical

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implications of the social cleavages in digital utilization and applications (Mohammed, 2005). That however, accompany information poverty and insecurity challenges emanating from the digital divide phenomenon. Nonetheless, scholarly investigation into the consequences of uneven technological diffusion for social inequality and exclusion has regrettably been modest and disproportionate. This polysemic socio-ethical condition have a profoundly contentious security implications for Africa that are most dramatic and urgent. It threatens not only the security of the region but the security of communities and/or the entire portions of the region's population. It is therefore a risk to both regional/national as well as the human security.

But despite the seeming pessimism of this development, the rhetoric of the discourse concerning the emerging pattern of cyber activity in Africa today reveals that the digital divide is not only a technological predicament; it is also an ethical crisis. This is so because the cyber security divide and processes are redefining security in the 21st century (Massumi, 2007). This study therefore examines some of the numerous challenges posed by unaffordable access of information technology to several sections of African communities. It posits that lack of access to information leads to social exclusion and questions the information economy that generates consequences for social divisions, social insecurity, diversity and differences among the already diversified African society. The digital divide phenomenon from an African perspective, mirrors the already existing social inequalities and widens the social division that has simply become more apparent with the expansion of the ICTs.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In the last one decade, contemporary criticism has witnessed an expanding conceptualization of where, and between whom, information inequities occur, and what these gaps entail for their different user groups (Schmith, 2012). However, recent scholarship has endeavoured to articulate a more nuanced conceptualization of the digital divide as a series of social gaps. But much of this literature refuses to view computer and Internet access as a technological determinism, and rather questions the reductive dichotomy of ICT haves and have-nots (Witte & Mannon, 2010). According to Wessels, "the rhetoric of the digital divide holds open the division between civilized tool-users and uncivilized nonusers" (2011). Obviously in the views of Eshet-Alkalie & Chajut, "how markets operate in the creation and maintenance of these digital divides, and how divisive political rhetoric damages efforts to locate remedies is a subject of concern (2009).

The digital divide is not about computers or connectivity *per se*; rather, the divide is a simplifying metaphor that questions the social gaps between humans that have and use ICTs, and societies that lack access to ICTs tools as well as skills to operate them (Ybarra & Suman, 2008). The failure to have equitable social access to amounts to living on the wrong side of the digital divide and poses serious social challenge. However, the exigency of the digital divide is not about denying its existence, but to ensure that the focus on the digital divide does not naturalize social exclusion and inequality (Standley, 2003). Framed as such, the new digital discrimination or what is popularly referred to as digital or virtual inequality is a complex and dynamic phenomenon (van Dijk & Hacker, 2003) and in its simplistic sense, conceptualized as a form of stratification exhibiting itself in unequal access and use of the Internet (Mossberger et al., 2003). This concept is typically measured using access to the Internet in opposition to those with non- access, number of sites at which the Internet is accessed, the users' skill in using the Internet, the amount of time spent online, and the variety of activities carried out digitally. Viewed diversely, the problem of the digital divide in Africa points to the fact that connectivity is a central enabling agent in building the Information Society. Universal, ubiquitous, equitable and affordable access to ICT infrastructure and services, constitutes one of the challenges of the Information Society and should be an objective of all stakeholders involved in building it (Monrne, 2004).

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