Chapter 7
From Drift to Draft:
International Institutional Responses to the Global Digital Divide

Roxana Georgiana Radu
Central European University, Hungary

ABSTRACT

The global digital divide, denoting the patterns of uneven distribution of information and communication technologies (ICTs) worldwide, emerged as a constant concern during the last two decades. Going beyond the minimal requirements of physical connectivity, it points to an underlying concern of digital inclusion differentials of citizens in developing countries, the so-called "information poor." This chapter aims at addressing this with reference to the international institutional structures and their current efforts. After assessing the categories of people that are affected the most by the digital gap and the range of opportunities available to them in the context of globalization, special attention will be given to the overlapping concerns shaping the international agenda with regard to ICT adoption. The creation of international bodies such as Sustainable Development Networking Programme (SDNP), Digital Opportunity Taskforce (DOT), and Information for Development Program (InfoDev) will be discussed together with the redefinition of the digital access problem as a "universal service" and the emergence of specific endeavors for reducing global digital inequalities.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2000, the penetration rate of information and communication technology (ICT) in developing countries has grown steadily. At any rate, the global digital divide between high-income and low-income countries has diminished only slightly, with the later continuing to have up to 56 times less access to the latest technology. In 2004, internet usage proportion in high-income countries was 5.8 times bigger than in middle-income economies and 19.4 times higher than in low-income states (Billon et al. 2009, 597). The ICT usage differentials have brought about a new type of inequalities, in relation with affordability of personal computers, access to internet, and

technological infrastructure (Castells 2001; Norris 2001; Warschauer 2003).

The global digital divide[1] has been defined as the range of "great disparities in opportunity to access the internet and the information and educational or business opportunities tied to this access between developed and developing countries" (Lu 2001, 1), pointing to a multi-dimensional gap. Manuel Castells (1997) categorized those belonging to unconnected parts of the globe as "the fourth world." For the purpose of this paper, the meaning of global digital divide will be restricted to unequal patterns of physical access to information technology infrastructure and to the internet in circumstances of marked inequality between high and low-level ICT participation worldwide, resulting in systematically placing in disadvantaged positions specific social groups (Reddick 2000; Jung et al. 2001; Loges and Jung 2001; Bonfadelli 2002). The benefits of the wired society have been analyzed not only in connection with economic development, but also with cultural and social capital (Selwyn 2004, 355).

During the last two decades, the worldwide digital imbalances have often been integrated into different interpretative frameworks of left or right-wing ideology, treating ICT access disparities as part of social inequalities or, respectively, as inherent to the range of differences that make individuals special (Hacker and Mason 2003, 100). Opposing this view, Ho and Tseng (2003, 5) argued that these great differentials in ICT capacity worldwide create disparities that go beyond the structure of the current social inequalities[2]. Studying the effect of ICT diffusion, Bikson and Panis (1995) found important differences among ethnic groups in the use of ICT, which was independent of the income and education levels. Needless to say, those who are already in a socially-disadvantaged position are indeed the first ones to be excluded from the benefits associated with the advent of information society. Still, it is important to consider the leapfrogging effect

in analysing the set of internationally-identified priorities in addressing the global digital gap.

According to a United Nations Report from 2001, the Internet usage represents a "global enclave," with 79% of all worldwide users living in the OECD countries, which comprise only 14% of the world population. This problem was usually depicted as a matter of relative divide[3] between wealthy and poor states (ICT Development Report 2006), rather than one of absolute digital divide (James 2009, 1124). Current reports from 2009 on internet usage show that the world average penetration rate is 25.6%, but the distance between the most wired and the least wired region of the globe is as great as 2.63 the world average (Internet Usage Statistics 2009).

As the new inequalities cannot be restricted to the problem solving capabilities of the national governments, additional cross-border initiatives emerged recently. This chapter sets out to offer a perspective on the trans-national efforts to reduce the global digital divide, firstly by discussing the creation of specialized institutions. Secondly, the most relevant points on the international agenda will be identified. Thirdly, a critical assessment of the internationally-designed policies will be presented, by drawing on their effects and potential for reducing or increasing the marked digital gap. Finally, conclusions will be drawn and future directions for international policy-making indicated.

THE GLOBAL DIGITAL DIVIDE AND ITS UNDERPINNINGS

The expansion of the internet has become integrated into different definitions of globalization, with the latter encompassing a dual process of "transformation" and "transcendence" (Bartelson 2000). While the first dimension points to the intensification of global exchanges, the second dimension captures the process of increased institutionalization at the international level. As such,

Related Content

Community-Based Distributed Learning in a Globalized World
Elizabeth Wellburnand Gregory Claeys (2008). *Global Information Technologies: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications (pp. 2134-2143).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/community-based-distributed-learning-globalized/19098

The Politics of Information Management
Lisa Petrides, Sharon Khanuja-Dhalland Pablo Reguerin (2006). *Cases on Information Technology and Organizational Politics & Culture (pp. 45-55).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/politics-information-management/6300

Information System Activities in Transnational Corporations: A Comparison of U.S. and Non-U.S. Subsidiaries
Maeve L. Cummingsand Jan L. Guynes (1994). *Journal of Global Information Management (pp. 12-27).*
www.irma-international.org/article/information-system-activities-transnational-corporations/51244

Service Quality Measurement in Information Systems: An Expectation and Desire Disconfirmation Approach
Ankit Kesharwani, Venkatesh Mani, Jighyasu Gaur, Samuel Fosso Wambaand Sachin S. Kamble (2021). *Journal of Global Information Management (pp. 1-19).*
www.irma-international.org/article/service-quality-measurement-information-systems/275610

Exploring the Intellectual Structure and International Cooperation in Information Management: A Bibliometric Overview Using 2-Tuple Linguistic Model
Huaige Zhang, Xianpei Hong, Qing Li, Yeming Gongand Shan Liu (2021). *Journal of Global Information Management (pp. 1-20).*
www.irma-international.org/article/exploring-the-intellectual-structure-and-international-cooperation-in-information-management/294577