Chapter 2
Information Literacy and the Digital Divide:
Challenging E-Exclusion in the Global South

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ABSTRACT

With the increasing spread of information and communications technologies (ICTs) globally, there is heightened debate about the continuing disparities of access and usage. The dialogue has proceeded in many respects oblivious of the centrality of information literacies in capacity building measures to redress the digital divide. This chapter examines both the concepts of the digital divide and information literacies and regards them as highly compatible in their application to the global south following a detailed analysis of issues such as orality and literacy, globalization from below and effective access to technology networks. The chapter concludes with a range of recommendations relating to reforms in strategic thinking and policy planning. The call for heightened emphasis on education including information literacies forms the centerpiece of an analysis grounded in both theory and empirical research.

INTRODUCTION

Discourses on the digital divide have often represented the issue as a matter mainly of access to physical resources such as computers, telephony and other networked ICT resources. While these technical appurtenances remain important to realizing greater global information equity, there is insufficient attention being paid to the urgency of information literacy and the development of the inherent information seeking capacities of humans, as a key component to any strategy to redress the digital divide.

As Horton (2007) points out, information literacy is about developing a wide range of cognitive skills: "understanding technologies is not enough" (p.5). Similarly The American Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), notes that information literacy "is an intellectual framework for understanding, finding, evaluating, and using information—activities which may be accomplished in part by fluency with information technology, in part by sound investigative methods, but most important, through critical discernment and reasoning. Information literacy initiates, sustains, and extends lifelong learning through abilities which may use technologies but are ultimately independent of them." (ACRL, 2000 p.3). While this definition is a useful one, its failure to reference people's information needs stands out.

Among the foundation competences required to seek out, interpret and make meaningful use of information, based on one's needs, are the traditional literacy skills of reading, writing and computation using a recognized system of symbols. From this point of departure, the chapter will explore the definitions and meanings ascribed to what we shall call the 'multiple literacies' required to function effectively in a knowledge-based society.

Many traditional societies already have forms of literacy and knowledge sharing that are often unrecognized and undervalued. Oral traditions of learning and knowing characterize many societies not equipped with the conventional tools of reading and writing. Knowledge is acquired, organized, stored and effectively communicated in many cultural and linguistic forms and through developed systems of non-verbal communication. Some of these competences may be gained from an early age or may be acquired later in life. One form of literacy may be used to enhance, teach and reinforce other necessary forms of literacy in the on-going cognitive process of learning, doing, growing and human development.

When applied to the concept of the digital divide, this idea of multiple literacies proves to be a potent construct in understanding how modestly endowed societies in terms of information communication technologies, may build on their own knowledge systems to increase information flow and operational effectiveness. It also helps us to understand how from their own knowledge base, these societies can more securely adopt and adapt new forms of knowledge, using new literacies and new technologies of information gathering.

We will delineate the varied forms of literacy and multiple representations of the digital divide already evident, and explore their relationship to notions of globalization. We argue in favour of a new multi-dimensional approach to human literacy that foregrounds information literacy as one way of beginning to tackle the wider, more long standing and pervasive social and economic divides that now increasingly reflect themselves in disparities of access to information. While these disparities are more clearly demonstrable within the ex-colonial countries of the South, these divides also pervade substantial marginalized segments of the industrialized north, such as reservations, trailer parks, inner city housing estates, deep rural villages and poor ethnic communities – places and spaces where concepts of economic disparity, digital divides and the need for information literacy and 'multiple literacies' will be just as applicable as in the global South.

The focus of the chapter is on deepening theoretical perspectives and sharing alternative understandings of literacy and the digital divide. It explores new approaches to redressing the global disparity, which is often as much economic and class based as it is linked to physical access to information. While encouraging a growth in technical access to ICTs, we argue that a solid foundation of technology assisted basic education is a key prerequisite to advanced and effective use of ICTs. The challenge of bridging the digital divide emerges as a far more nuanced and complex process involving greater emphasis on social context, multiple literacies and, yes, effective technology access.

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