Chapter 37
Digital Divide in Turkey:
A General Assessment

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the nature of digital divide in Turkey. To this end, after a brief summary of the literature, first, the dimensions of digital divide in the country are explained. Then, various initiatives by the government, private firms, NGOs, and international organizations to combat digital divide are presented. Next, in the discussion section, issues for further discussion regarding digital divide in Turkey are listed. The chapter ends with the examination of the issues regarding the future prospects for overcoming digital divide in Turkey and developing countries elsewhere.

INTRODUCTION

Increasing access to and use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in developing countries is a phenomenon, which is hailed by many as a positive development that would stimulate a knowledge-based economy and society in these countries. The underlying assumption is that higher levels of and more equitable access to ICTs would stimulate economic growth, enhance national, regional, organizational and individual competitiveness, enable democratic participation and foster social equality. However, digital divide, that is, the division of the globe in general and individual countries, regions, organizations, and individuals in particular as "technology haves" and "have-nots", is casting a long shadow on these hopes.

Turkey, as a candidate country to the European Union (EU), strives for overcoming the digital divide problem as part of a strategic objective of the i2010 Strategic Plan, parallel to its membership negotiation and integration processes with the EU. To this end, different dimensions of digital divide in Turkey, such as gender, education level, location (urban-rural), and age are evaluated in this chapter, by using the current academic literature, statistical figures provided by Turkish government

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agencies, and examining strategy documents and current legislation, such as Turkey's Information Society Strategy and Action Plan documents, and the Universal Service Law.

This chapter evaluates digital divide in Turkey in terms of different dimensions of the problem, the proposed solutions and their implementations. These solutions are; using Internet cafes as access points by providing them with tax breaks, establishing Public Internet Access Points (PIAPs) by the help of municipal or national government agencies, setting up Internet centers for disadvantaged people, such as people with disabilities and housewives, using computers and Internet connections in community centers, libraries and schools for providing citizen access, encouraging people to access information via 3rd generation (3G)-enabled mobile phones, and finally government agencies cooperating with non-governmental organizations and private firms in order to provide education opportunities for citizens so that they can fully utilize computer and Internet access, once they are provided. The chapter concludes with the problems of implementation and future prospects for overcoming digital divide in Turkey and developing countries elsewhere.

BACKGROUND

Although some argue that there is no consensus on its definition, extent or impact (Dewan & Riggins, 2005: 299), the concept of digital divide can be basically defined as the difference between nation-states, regions, organizations (or businesses) and individuals in access to and value-adding use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for a wide variety of activities (OECD, 2001: 5; Kaufman, 2005: 293). The most important determinants of the occurrence of this gap between the users and non-users of ICTs are listed as education level, geographical location, age, gender and race (Bikson & Panos, 1999: 31-41; Neu, Anderson & Bikson, 1999: xxii). Different solutions have been proposed to overcome digital divide. Some of these can be listed as using taxes (subsidies), tariffs, trade & legislation, and funding for public access points (Dewan & Riggins, 2005: 299).

An excellent summary of the academic literature on different levels of the digital divide phenomenon was done by Dewan & Riggins (2005). This chapter deals mostly with the individual and nation-state levels of the digital divide phenomenon in Turkey and the solutions proposed so as to overcome this problem.

Digital divide at the nation-state (global) level is a serious concern as it divides the world as technology haves and have-nots, with grave economic and social repercussions. Studies show that a variety of factors are to blame for this gap in the use of technology: In a review of 71 developed and developing countries, Pick & Azari (2008) found out that scientific and technical capacity, foreign direct investment, government prioritization of ICT, public spending on education, and quality of math/science education are all important determinants of the global digital divide. In a review of 80 developing countries, Crenshaw & Robison (2006) came to the conclusion that foreign investments, major urban agglomerations, manufacturing exports, non-governmental organization presence, tourism, democratic openness, property rights and income all affect the rate of Internet diffusion throughout the world. Demoussis & Giannakopulous (2006) arrived at similar findings at the European level, when they determined that household income, cost of access, demographics, media use, regional characteristics, and individual level general skill acquisition are determinants of Internet use and its extent.

Although providing access to ICTs is required to combat digital divide, only access is not sufficient to overcome the problem and to make it possible for people to materialize the benefits expected of value-added ICT use. When evaluating the effects of digital divide, Kaufman (2005: 294) emphasizes that there are two levels: First order

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