

Chapter 3

Second Order Divide in Internet Usage in Developing Countries: An Overlooked Issue?

Aparna Purushothaman
Aalborg University, Denmark

Lone Dirckinck Holmfeld
Aalborg University – Copenhagen, Denmark

Moly Kuruvilla
University of Calicut, India

ABSTRACT

Internet literacy is crucial to become information literate and for lifelong learning for today's citizens. However, there is an identified gendered digital divide in Internet usage, as the major proportion of unconnected citizens, especially in the developing economies in Asian countries are women. The problems of the gender digital divide are not just limited to connectivity and infrastructural issues, literacy and the cost of access, which are often discussed in the literature. The authors identify some of the second order factors that are often overlooked and arise out of cognitive, psychological and social factors leading to the digital divide. The paper also discusses possible measures that could be taken up to address the second order gender digital divide.

1. INTRODUCTION

Access to information and communication technologies is a key factor that contributes to the socio-economic development of a society (Armenta, Serrano, Cabrera, & Conte, 2012). Information & Communication Technologies (ICTs) have the power to improve the lives of people by enabling access to knowledge, facilitating economic growth and social development and improving health care, education and government functioning (Qureshi, 2012). In terms of the most powerful ICT tool, the Internet, "An increasingly ubiquitous, open, fast and content-rich Internet has changed the way how people live,

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communicate and do business” (ITU, 2016, p. 181). The Internet represents a gateway to new ideas and opportunities, a means of self-expression and empowerment, a driving force for innovation and, increasingly, sustainable growth and has become a critical digital tool helping both men and women across the globe (UNESCO, 2013). It has become a platform for engaging in a variety of activities that are substitutes for those occurring in the physical, face-to-face world (Barak & Sadovsky, 2008). The Internet also has sparked an upsurge of interest among developmental scholars to determine how ICTs might be applied for ensuring and augmenting sustainable development (Heeks, 2009).

As with any other new technology, the Internet has been unequally distributed across societies and therefore does not offer the same opportunities to everyone or every social group (Pan, Yan, Jing, & Zheng, 2011; Walton, Yaaqoubi, & Kolko, 2012). While an estimated 81% of the populations in developed economies use the Internet, the number of people using the Internet in developing nations is only 41%, and in the least developed economies only 17.5% of the population is using the Internet (ITU, 2017).

2. IS THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE STILL A DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUE?

In regard to the digital divide, one of the most pertinent technological inequalities is the gender divide (Dixon et al., 2014). The gender digital divide refers “to the structure of opportunities, cultural attitudes and skills related to the use of ICTs” (UNESCO, 2014, p. 50). In terms of the Internet, the digital divide is fundamentally gender related (Bimber, 2000; Kennedy, Wellman, Klement, & Klement, 2003; Ono & Zavodny, 2003; Vijayalakshmi & Bhavani, 2006). While the Internet is considered to be ‘genderless’ since it is available to and usable by anyone who chooses, a greater proportion of the unconnected global citizens are women (UNESCO, 2013).

There is no denying the fact that when women are successfully connected to the Internet they can be well informed, and this can significantly contribute to the economic and social development of a country and lead to significant boost in its national income (Intel, 2013). Although there has been a reported increase in the access to and use of technology by both women and men, women continue to be less technologically oriented than their male counterparts. Women are less intense users of both e-mail and the Web, and they use the web less diversely than do men (Miller & Shrum, 2011). Gender differences continue to be reported in research studies (Johnson, 2010; Pan et al., 2011). The Internet is not viewed as an enabling environment for women, as many women do not feel comfortable with some of the content (Gajjala, 2002). Some studies show that women tend to show higher levels of discomfort with the Internet and show more anxiety than men (Chou, 2003; Jackson et al., 2001; Schumacher & Morahan-Martin, 2001; Tsai, Lin, & Tsai, 2001). Hence, women use the Internet less frequently compared to men (Bimber, 2000; Kennedy et al., 2003; Ono & Zavodny, 2003; Wasserman & Richmond-Abbott, 2005).

It is important to examine whether a gender gap exists even today. The reported gender digital divide in Internet access and usage is large in developing countries, showing that the number of women not receiving the benefits of these ICT tools is still enormous. Intel’s (2013) report on women and the Web shows that 21% of women and girls in developing countries have access to the Internet compared to 27% of men, which means that there is a huge gap of around 200 million women who are still not connected to the Internet.

International Telecommunication Union (ITU) states that the proportion of men using the Internet is higher than the proportion of women using the Internet in two-thirds of the countries worldwide (ITU,

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