

Chapter XXVIII

The Digital Divide and Social Equity

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INTRODUCTION

The Pew Internet and American Life Project (Pew/Internet; Lenhart, Horrigan, Rainie et al., 2003) reports 42 percent of Americans say they do not use the Internet, with 24 percent being truly off-line with no direct or indirect experience with the Internet. However, these percentages represent averages and don't pertain uniformly across all subpopulations. Pew/Internet (Fox, 2005) reports Americans age 65 and older, African-Americans, and those with less education lag behind others in Internet usage. The present article examines the impact of these differences on social equity in terms of receiving fair, just, and equitable treatment by the political system regarding public policies and services.

Pew/Internet (Madden, 2006) reports 53 percent of adults living in households with less than \$30,000 in annual income use the Internet, versus 80 percent of those with incomes between \$30,000-50,000, 86 percent of adults living in

households with annual incomes between \$50,000 and \$75,000, and 91 percent of adults living in households earning more than \$75,000. Regarding Internet usage by race and ethnicity, Fairlie (2004) reports 70 percent of whites, 41 percent of blacks, and 39 percent of Latinos have access to home computers and 50 percent of whites, 29 percent of blacks, and 24 percent of Latinos have access to the Internet in the United States. Finally, Pew/Internet (Madden, 2006) reports level of education is also an important indicator for Internet use. "While 40 percent of adults who have less than a high school education use the Internet, 64 percent of adults with a high school degree go online. Among those who have some college education, 84 percent use the Internet, and 91 percent of adults with at least a college degree go online" (Madden, 2006, p. 4).

These statistics suggest a digital divide between those who have reasonable access to information technology and those who do not. One reason why this divide is an important issue is that access to

information technology has a large impact on the ability of individuals to acquire knowledge and to become active creators and distributors of information. Moreover, this divide negatively affects the ability of the poor and minorities to accumulate social capital (Putnam, 2000) and participate fully in our technological society.

As the Internet becomes increasingly central to living in today's society, it becomes important that certain groups are not systematically excluded. This chapter examines the digital divide with an emphasis on critical perspectives that recognize power, racism, and social stratification and the challenges faced by public officials to promote information technology policies and programs that support social equality.

BACKGROUND

The term digital divide can take on several meanings, but at the most basic level it refers to the division between those who have reasonable access to the Internet and those who do not. Any discussion about the digital divide, particularly when related to digital inequality, assumes the knowledge gap hypothesis (e.g., Bonfadelli, 2002), which suggests a growing knowledge gap between individuals who have access to and are able to use information and those who are not. A digital divide exists anytime there is a gap in opportunities experienced by those with limited access to technology, especially the Internet.

Warschauer (2003) argues that the digital divide, like literacy, is not a binary issue, one of haves and have nots; there are different degrees of computer access just as there are different degrees of literacy. The term digital divide describes inequalities in access to computers and the Internet between various subpopulations. The racial digital divide, for example, describes the difference in rates of access to computers and the Internet between those racial groups with high rates of access, such as whites, and those with lower rates of access, such as African Americans.

The Center for the Digital Future (2005) reports the top reasons cited by the 21.4 percent

of Americans who do not use the Internet are no computer at home, lack of interest or knowledge, and the expenses associated with computer ownership and Internet access. Reddick (2002) suggests non-users can be divided into three types.

1. **Type 1:** Non-users recognize the value of the Internet and believe it may be beneficial for meeting their needs. However, their main obstacles are the technical skill development and affordability of the technology.
2. **Type 2:** Non-users face the same problems as Type 1 non-users but they also lack perceived personal or social benefit from use of the Internet.
3. **Type 3:** Non-users are similar to Type 2 non-users but are unlikely to have the interest, resources, or social skills to benefit from Internet access.

On the other hand, Stewart (2000) identifies the following reasons most people get online:

1. Life events: Events that create new opportunities, relationships, time pressures, demands for work, and so forth.
2. Social push: The social pressure of friends, family, and colleagues to adopt and use the Internet.
3. Multimedia pull or instrumental need: Demands of work, or participation in other activities where information technology offers benefits of efficiency or economy, or is the only tool for the job.
4. Curiosity and interest in technology or content.

The term digital divide is also used to address the disparities in computer ownership and access to high-speed broadband digital services. Most of our knowledge about this divide is based on surveys that suggest it is mostly related to ethnic and minority group affiliation, geographic location, household composition, age, education, and income level (Katz & Aspden, 1997). Those on the wrong side of the digital divide are denied the option to participate effectively in new high

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