Chapter VII

Social Justice and Market Metaphysics:
A Critical Discussion of Philosophical Approaches to Digital Divides

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Abstract

A book on the topic of information technology and social justice would seem to be based on several implicit assumptions. One of these is that there are unequal distributions of technology and access to technology, which can be called "digital divides." Another one is that these digital divides are a problem for justice. A final one is that a philosophical debate of these issues can be beneficial. This chapter aims to question the validity of these assumptions. It asks what philosophy contributes to the debate about digital divides. In order to do so, it briefly reviews the debates concerning justice and digital divides. It then discusses the question whether markets or states are better suited to overcome the unequal distribution of technology. The purpose of these brief restatements of some of the opinions found in the literature is to show that philosophy alone cannot inform us of what we should do. The chapter concludes by suggesting that, in order to address problems of digital divides, we need to go beyond philosophical debate and enter the political space.

Introduction

The world is not just. One striking example of this is the fact that a minority of human beings have access to technology, whereas the majority does not. This, combined with the fact that technology, particularly information technology, can make life easier and provide meaningful activities, strikes many of us as unjust. It is the underlying problem that we try to capture with the term "digital divide." Philosophy has always been interested in ethics and morality. These are linked with justice. It thus stands to reason that philosophy can help us understand and address the problem of justice regarding the digital divide(s). This is, in a nutshell, the reasoning behind the project of creating a book about digital divides from a philosophical point of view. It is a sympathetic thought in that it aims to improve the state of the world or at least lay conceptual foundations for such an improvement. At the same time it is a contentious idea because it rests on the assumption that philosophy can actually provide a useful input to the debate on digital divides whereas it is not clear what would constitute a useful input.

This chapter aims to provide a critical perspective on the possibility of a philosophical contribution to the debate. The fundamental stance of the chapter is a critical one in the tradition of critical social science as informed by a long line of scholars from Marx to the Frankfurt School. This critical tradition has more recently been joined by the ranks of scholars who are often called "postmodern" (Chua, 1986; Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991; Nord & Jermier, 1992). The commonality of these critical approaches is that they question the basics of research assumptions, that they do not take for granted accepted realities, and that they are deeply reflective. They aim to open discursive closures and to facilitate the creation of new realities by instituting new discourses (Fairclough, 1993; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999).

Applied to the topic of IT and the digital divide this means that, as a critical researcher, one has to ask oneself what the purpose of the proposed research is, how it is framed and expressed, and whose knowledge interests are being served. The tenet of a philosophical discussion of social justice with regard to the digital divide is that philosophers have something to add to the debate, that this knowledge they have is currently missing, and that it will make a relevant difference in some way (Parker, 2003). Presumably in this case the contribution of philosophy is conceptual clarification, something that is often regarded as the task of philosophy (Wittgenstein, 1963). While we can probably grant that philosophy is capable of providing thorough conceptual work, the other two aspects are more difficult to prove. Is the conceptual knowledge philosophers can provide really missing? And if so, do they really have a chance to provide it to those who need it? Indeed, are they even able to identify those who need it? While I am slightly less positive about this second aspect than the first one, I will concede that this is conceivably so, that philosophical investigation may bring clarity to those in need of it. That leaves the final point,

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