Chapter II
Digital Divide:
Introduction to the Problem

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter the authors introduce the digital-divide concept to the reader, bring its different definitions, and describe the short history of the problem. The basic figures and facts, which characterize the information and communication technologies' usage in different countries and regions, are given as well. Also, basic indicators that allow the monitoring of the country's advancement on the way to bridging the digital divide are stated. The main purpose for the authors was to show that the digital divide is not only (and not as much) a technical problem, but rather a social and political one. Hence, the approaches to this problem decision, both in the world community as a whole and in separate countries, are described.

INTRODUCTION

"The future belongs not so much to those peoples who have achieved today a high standard of well-being, as to those ones which can induce new ideas in the field of high technologies and in their relations with the Nature. The erudition is necessary for this purpose, and not of separate people, but of the nation as a whole. And this circumstance

imposes the special responsibility on a governing body of the state and on the intelligentsia." (N. N. Moiseev, "Universum. Information. Society." Moscow, 2001)

"It is not the gap that divides, but the difference of levels." (Stanislaw J. Lec, "Unkempt Thoughts")

The problem of the digital divide has probably only now begun to be perceived as it deserves. Practically any society can face it. Its manifestations are so various in different countries that it is actually impossible to offer common recipes for its solution. As the problem is basically social rather than technological, the ways of its overcoming depend on the degree of the democratization of a society, on the standard of living of a population, on the level of population erudition, and on cultural and ethnic features of the specific community of people. Certainly, the presence of an ICT infrastructure is necessary, but this is only the necessary condition. This chapter contains a brief history of the problem and various relevant definitions. On the basis of statistical data, the state of the art in the world is shown, the various countries are compared, and some basic ideas of the Genoa action plan are stated.

The necessary steps, without which the solution of the digital-divide problem is impossible, are brought. Positive experiences of the European Union (EU) and other countries are confirmed by examples. Basic indicators of the digital divide that allow the monitoring of the problem solution are brought as well.

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE PROBLEM

The end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st were marked by the rapid development of information and communication technologies, which has led to the avalanche growth of digital information. However, any progressive phenomenon, as a rule, is accompanied also by negative by-products. In this case, alongside the overcoming of existing temporal, spatial, and social borders when using information, society has also received a new problem, the so-called digital divide. There are a lot of definitions of this term, which as a matter of fact are reduced to the following: "the term 'digital divide' describes the fact that the world can be divided into people who do and people who don't have access to—and the capability to use—modern information and communication technology" (*Digital Divide*, 1999).

The world community started talking about the problem of the digital divide and the "have-nots" at the end of the last century (Brown, Barram, & Irving, 1995). The *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (2004) considers that the term digital divide was used for the first time in 1995 in an article of Ohio's daily newspaper *Columbus Dispatch* and gives the following explanation as the commonly accepted meaning of this term: "the gulf between those who have ready access to current digital technology (esp. computers and the Internet) and those who do not; (also) the perceived social or educational inequality resulting from this." At that time, many people refused to take this problem seriously and even spoke about it as a far-fetched problem that promoted further enrichment of computer and telecommunication corporations. By the end of the '90s, the stable concept of the digital divide appeared as the serious, recognized problem that is regularly being studied and periodically being discussed by people all over the world today.

In 1999, in its third survey *Falling Through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide*, the USA National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) noted that the digital divide became "one of America's leading economic and civil rights issues" (1999, p. xiii).

With time, many international organizations and agencies (United Nations [UN], European Union, World Bank, United Nations Development

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