

Chapter III

Global Digital Divide, Global Justice, Cultures, and Epistemology

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ABSTRACT

The problem of global digital divide, namely disparity in Internet access and use among the various regions of the world, is a growing concern. Even though, according to some reports, the gap is getting narrower, this does not mean that the problem is disappearing, because the problem does not just consist in getting more people to become “wired,” so to speak. This chapter investigates the various relationships among the global digital divide, global justice, cultures and epistemology. Very briefly stated, not getting access to the Internet constitutes an injustice because the access is a social good that can lead to various other goods. Furthermore, as informa-

tion technology is a second-order technology, one that operates on meaning bearing symbols, access to the technology is very much an issue of social epistemology, an attempt to find out the optimal way to distribute knowledge across the social and cultural domains.

INTRODUCTION

The digital divide has been one of most talked about phenomena in recent years. Trying to bridge the gap has been on the agenda of virtually all public policy makers since the products of information and communication technologies started to become more common not too long ago. It is

recognized almost universally that the digital divide, basically a gap in access to and use of information technology and the global network that access makes possible, and especially the *global* digital divide, represent a significant policy problem that governments at various levels in all countries feel the need to address. The amount of attention and, more importantly, of physical and intellectual resources devoted to the issue has been really staggering. It has been so intensive in recent years that the World Bank announced a little while ago that the global digital divide is indeed disappearing (*Digital divide closing fast*, 2005).

Hence it might seem that the topic of this chapter is beginning to be outmoded. After all, if the digital divide is really closing, then why should we be concerned with its ethical or social implications? The exercise may cease to be relevant for current public policy formulation and may indeed become one of history—what kind of social and ethical implications arose when the digital divide prevailed? However, I do not believe that discussing the ethical dimensions of the digital divide would become irrelevant; nor do I believe that we would cease talking about the phenomenon, even if it really is the case that it is indeed disappearing. For reasons that will be made clear in this chapter, the sheer fact that more and more households in the world are equipped with computer technology and are getting wired to the Internet does not automatically translate to the realization of all the goals and visions that characterized attempts to close the digital divide. Simply having a tool does not always mean that one uses it in the way that was originally intended. We are now just beginning to see how the tools of information and communication technologies are going to be used in the various localities around the world.

What I would like to do in this chapter is to begin to explore the relations between the global digital divide, global justice, cultures and epistemology. This is pertinent to the discussion earlier

because attempts to bridge the global digital divide, I would like to argue, are a species of attempts to bring about global justice and that the attempts need first to start from an appreciation of local cultures and how these cultures view their own epistemic practices, which are invariably part and parcel of their own cultures. Nevertheless, I can do no more than present a brief sketch of the relations here, because to do justice to each of the aspects of the relations would take us further afield than the space of this chapter allows. The sketch is also intended as an invitation to further research. The World Bank report that the digital divide is disappearing everywhere may be convincing, but it does not lessen the urgency of making an effort to understand how these factors are related to one another. This is so because simply providing the population with hardware and software and access to the Internet seldom suffices to realize the kind of “utopian” information society that the earlier pioneers and evangelists of information technology had in their visionary eyes.

NARROWING OF THE GLOBAL DIGITAL DIVIDE AND THE PERSISTENCE OF OLD PROBLEMS

It was just only slightly more than two decades ago that personal computers started to make their way into our lives; and the Internet started to appear on the scene little more than a decade ago. Yet these seem to most of us like ages ago. This points to the extreme speed at which the technology is evolving and spreading throughout the world. When it was in its infancy, proponents of information technology usually hailed it as a harbinger of a time when time itself and distance were eliminated. A result of this would be, in their view, a complete merging of ideas and information in such a way that every piece of information would be at everybody’s fingertips. Ideas such as democracy and freedom would float around the world and enter the consciousness of the people

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