

Chapter V

New Media Literacy and the Digital Divide

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the intimate relationship between new media literacy and the digital divide. The longer and deeper digital technology (DT) penetrates the fabric of society, the more it becomes connected to broader social concerns such as disadvantaged minorities, long-term poverty, access to resources or equal opportunities for all citizens. Contrary to initial expectations, DT is far from providing immediate responses to educational problems and even less, automatic relief to real world injustice; left to its own devices, it tends to reflect and increase existing forms of exclusion rather than ameliorate them. In order to address these issues, this chapter combines three major topics. Firstly, we summarize the argument on the closing vs. deepening digital divide. Physical access figures are presented according to adult and younger population, their socio-economic status and in relation to schools. Secondly, more recent findings are shown, dealing with the quality and use of the Internet by pupils. Thirdly, a more general reflection is introduced in relation to the role of schools and intervention strategies for implementing sustainable educational projects aimed at helping to improve social participation in a society for all.

FROM THE DIGITAL DIVIDE TO SOCIAL INCLUSION

The more digital technology (DT) pervades society, the more it becomes attached to existing patterns of social inequalities. It is increasingly evident that DT does not provide a ready-made remedy for real-world injustice. On the contrary, it rather tends to strengthen existing social structures and inequalities (van Dijk, 2005; Warschauer, 2000). Young people are no exception. Nevertheless, they use DT more than any other age group. As their lives are increasingly mediated by DT at home and at school, existing socio-economic patterns permeate their usage. Schools are crucial in this context because they provide a major access opportunity, especially for less advantaged students and can offer alternative usage profiles. As the academic and policy discussion has moved beyond a binary understanding of the digital divide between “haves” and “have-nots”, different concepts of media-, computer-, information- and multi-literacies have emerged. Indeed, the early concerns with providing physical access have been largely resolved in OECD countries –although it is not the case for the great majority of the rest. Despite this success in terms of infrastructure in technologically developed countries, social inequalities at large are still present. The question, therefore, is how can schools contribute to a more encompassing sense of digital equity and ameliorate the *multi-dimensional* gaps that separate the information poor from the information rich? This is an especially pressing problem, since new media literacy cannot be addressed in an isolated fashion within schools (Kalantzis, Cope, & Learning by Design Group, 2005). Wider social networks and pupils’ cultural capital emerge as decisive differential factors. Earlier differences in access are thus repeated in contemporary inequities of skills and sophistication of usage of DT. This implies that theoretical and practical counter-measures directed at reducing inequalities in the digital realm have to merge forces with strategies for social inclusion as such.

Computer and Internet Access in Schools

To the degree that societal organization resorts, to a large extent, on information, social participation depends on having access to a communication infrastructure. Early conceptions of the digital divide foregrounded consequentially the gap between those who have access to technology and those who do not. The ensuing policies to close the gap in terms of providing inclusive access to DT have been successful, at least in technologically developed countries. According to the latest figures of the PEW Internet & American Life Project (2006, 2007b), compared to 66 percent of online users in 2006, 75 percent of all United States adults were connected by the end of 2007.

Access is clearly patterned in terms of socio-economic status (SES), although the gap is not as big as it was in earlier years. Data from different statistical sources coincide in a strong correlation between income and likelihood of being online (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Among family households with income above US\$100,000, 95 percent had at least one computer and 92 percent had Internet access at home. This contrasts with only 41 percent of households with income below US\$25,000 having a computer. The inequality of computer and network access for low-income households appears to remain fairly stable when compared to more recent data from PEW (2006). Again, just 53 percent of adults with less than US\$30,000 annual income go online versus 91% of adults living in households earning more than US\$75,000. A similar pattern has to be described when taking ethnicity into account. 71 percent of all whites vs. 60 percent all Afro-Americans and 56 percent of Hispanics of the adult population are connected. Language barrier is, for example, an important aspect for the Hispanic and other non-English speaking population. Only 32 percent of the non-English speaking Hispanics are online (PEW, 2007a).

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