Chapter 32
From the Digital Divide to Multiple Divides:
Technology, Society, and New Media Skills

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ABSTRACT

It is widely acknowledged that the label "digital divide" can be partially misleading, because it emphasizes a binary dichotomy ("haves vs. have nots") and a mere technological dimension (in terms of physical availability of devices or conduits). Behind the dichotomous model, however, lie different use and adoption strategies. People cannot be described as being either in or out. Evaluating the complex relationships between technological, social, and human factors raises a number of questions, mainly related to the role of technology in social development. Moreover, we should also reconsider what is commonly meant by information and communication technology. In this chapter, I will try to introduce a multilevel model for analyzing the digital divide, focusing on effective access and new media literacy. The focus will be shifted from technology to humans. In every ICT for development project, local context and local needs should be regarded as the key factors.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the digital divide from a sociological and media studies perspective, referring, for a better understanding of the subject, to the wider literature on the relationship between communication technology and society.

Not only common sense, but also many political and academic definitions of the "digital divide" seem to mainly consider the technological aspects of the question, without paying any attention to the complex human and social phenomena related to technology adoption and diffusion.

As we should have learned from wide international experience in the field of Information and Communication Technology for development (ICT4D), significant problems may occur when projects focus on providing hardware and software, or mere connectivity, without paying sufficient attention to the human and social factors involved.

Therefore, we should abandon any technological deterministic perspective, without falling into sociological determinism. When considering the global divide, we should not question if the priority is to "provide food, healthcare or a Personal Computer" to developing countries. We should, instead, evaluate which technologies are most suitable to the needs of intended targets, with constant attention to the relevant context.

When considering the intra moenia divide (the "social divide", according to Norris, 2001), we should focus not only on devices or network availability, but also on individual and social use of technology, as research on (Internet) Dropouts has pointed out (Katz & Rice, 2002a).

That's what we define as "enabling technology": access to a set of technologies is not a priority in itself, especially in developing countries; it becomes a priority if it enables a wide range of Information Society services, contributing to addressing the developing countries' basic needs (e.g. eHealth, eLearning, information concerning agriculture or the job market, etc.).

Therefore, we need to widen our perspective on the global digital divide, considering not only access but also effective use of Information and Communication Technology. In this chapter, after having questioned the widespread dichotomous approach to the digital divide, and a limiting conception of technology, I will introduce the "enabling technology" perspective and I will try to propose a multilevel model for analyzing the digital divide, proceeding from mere technology availability to effective use, and focusing on advanced reception practices, technical skills, content production, and networking skills. New media literacy will play a central role in the proposed model.

RETHINKING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE: COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIETY

Rethinking the relationship between technological, social and human factors has deep consequences on the definitions and on the theoretical framework we apply to the digital divide.

It is widely acknowledged that the label "digital divide" can be partially misleading, because it mostly emphasizes (1) a binary dichotomy ("haves vs have nots") and (2) a limiting approach to the technological dimension (mainly focusing on physical availability of devices or conduits), and to the relationships between technology and society.

The conceptual framework offered by the digital divide can also be limiting, because it appears to focus on the "gaps" that divide specific populations, i.e. on the needs affecting the so-called "have nots", mostly located in the globalSouth, perpetuating a western-centric perspective on development.

Consequently, a rising number of scholars are questioning the label "digital divide", adding in their books' titles expressions like "rethinking", "redefining", or "beyond" (Warschauer, 2003; Mossberger, Tolbert & Stansbury, 2003, etc.).

Others suggest new definitions, in order to better describe the multidimensional phenomena related to the increasing diffusion of ICTs, such as "digital inequality" (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001); or propose a new framework, a "more nuanced" lens, aiming to assume the unconnected's point of view, under the definition of "zones of silence" (Potter, 2006).

Moreover, the term appears to be mobile: it has often been defined as a "moving target", shifting forward every time a newer technology starts its diffusion (from a mere technological point of view, in the western world we have been dealing with first an Internet access divide, followed by a broadband divide, and are now concerned with wireless broadband technologies and Next Generation Access Networks).

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