Deconstructing the 'Digital Divide' In Africa

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ABSTRACT

The debate about whether the digital divide between Africa and the developed world is narrowing or widening has intensified over the last five years. Some believe that access to technology is positively correlated to economic development and wealth creation, however, since the dawn of the last century, the gap between the rich and the poor within and between developed and developing countries has continued to grow. The protagonists in this debate do not seem to appreciate the notion that the digital divide is not about a single technology, and is driven by a complex set of factors that exist beyond wires. This paper attempts to deconstruct the concept of the digital divide beyond access to PCs, telephones, Internet, cable TV, etc… The authors argue that the phenomenon as currently conceived is misleading and flawed, and so are the indices for its measurement. Suggestions that a new model for mapping the phenomenon is made in order to bridge the divide between developed and developing countries. In deconstructing the digital divide, the authors use the Declaration of Principles of the World Summit on Information Society and the indices used to measure e-readiness, information society, digital opportunity, and e-government.

Keywords: *Africa, Digital Divide, Digital Divide Indices, Digital Opportunity, Information Society*

1. INTRODUCTION

There has been mounting debate over the last five years on whether the digital divide between developing and developed countries is narrowing or widening. Those who believe in the former are quick to cite Africa's leadership in mobile phone penetration to prove their point. However, the digital divide is not about a single technology, nor even about technologies per se; more accurately, it is driven by a complex set of factors that exist beyond wires. Those who believe that the digital divide is widening cite the difference between those in society with broadband access and those without. More specifically, they note the difference between those with access to fiber optics (faster broadband) and those with slower broadband access (coaxial, copper wires, satellites). The digital divide, seen from the perspective of this disparity, has acquired the nomenclature 'new digital divide'. This so-called new digital divide is also about access to technology, disparities in the use of technology, the influence exerted by the international political elite, digital access and development, digital natives (early adopters), digital immigrants (laggards), and the digital gaps occasioned by web 2.0 technologies and applications. (Notes: also about access – how does it differ from original term?)

DOI: 10.4018/jide.2010070104

The digital divide has often been perceived as inequitable access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) such as PCs, the Internet, telephones, cable and other Internet-related technologies by individuals or groups of people in a country or across countries (Spectar, 2000). This was evident during the 2003 WSIS Summit in Geneva when poorer countries, particularly those from Africa, lobbied successfully for the establishment of a "Digital Solidarity Fund" to help finance the infrastructure that is "very much needed" to close the perceived technological divide. African member states argued that one of the key problems affecting access to ICT in Africa is lack of adequate requisite infrastructure, such as telephone access, mass media and other types of communication systems (PANOS, 2004).

Definitions of the 'digital divide' that emphasize technologies may be viewed as the 'first generation' type. However, recent literature expands on the scope of the term, thus pushing the phenomenon to the next (second generation) level. For example, the International Telecommunications Union (2002) observes that the so-called "new" or "quality" digital divide cannot be attributed to the lack of equipment or connections; rather the nature of the phenomenon is changing from "basic to advanced communications and from quantity to quality". (Notes: check quote. Revise sentence) Warschauer (2002) observes that bridging the digital divide is about far more than providing Internet and computer connections, because access to ICT is embedded in a complex array of factors encompassing physical, digital, human and social relationships. Norris (2001) suggests that the digital divide requires us to look beyond the issue of access to technology. (Notes: continuity) The digital divide is a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing three distinct aspects, namely: the global divide, which refers to differences in Internet access across industrialized and developing societies; the social divide, which is concerned with the gap between the information rich and information poor in each nation; and the democratic divide, which signifies the difference between those who do and those who do not use the panoply of digital resources at their disposal to engage and participate in public life.

Despite the increasing recognition that the digital divide goes beyond access to wires, efforts to bridge the phenomenon in the past have been driven by the first and second generation definitions. Examples include the Digital Opportunity Task Force (2002); National Information Infrastructure (NII) and Global Information Infrastructure (GII) projects in the US (Miranda, 2006); African Information Society Initiative (AISI) (Amoako, 1996); New Partnership for Africa's Development e-school programme (Association for Progressive Communications, 2005); East African Submarine Cable System (EASSy); SAT-3/WASC or South Atlantic 3/ West Africa Submarine Cable; Common Market for East and Southern Africa (COMESA) Telecommunications project (COMTEL); and Kenya's government-sponsored undersea fibre optic cable, known as The East Africa Marine System [TEAMS] (Morris, 2007).

The departure from the first and second generation definitions of the digital divide and the ushering in of what I consider to be phase three emerged during the World Summit on (Notes: Not World Summit on 'the' Information society. Change accordingly throughout text) Information Society (International Telecommunication Union, 2003). The common vision of the summit reads: "We, the representatives of the peoples of the world, assembled in Geneva from 10-12 December 2003 for the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society, declare our common desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life […]". The WSIS Declaration of Principles also went beyond access and emphasized "access to information and knowledge, capacity building, building confidence and security in the use of ICTs". The principles also recognize cultural