Chapter 8
What Does it Mean to Bridge the Divide?
Learning from Spontaneous Practices towards ICTs

Suely Fragoso
Universidade do Vale do Rio do Sinos (Unisinos), Brazil

Denise Cogo
Universidade do Vale do Rio do Sinos (Unisinos), Brazil

Liliane Dutra Brignol
Universidade do Vale do Rio do Sinos (Unisinos) & Centro Universitario Franciscano (Unifra), Brazil

ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the success and failure of initiatives which provide access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as a means of promoting social inclusion. We believe that there is often a disparity between the supposed and the true needs and desires of the minority groups at the receiving end of digital divide initiatives. Observation of practices towards ICTs which are spontaneously developed by a minority group indicate that important achievements are being overlooked by formal evaluations of digital divide projects and policies. The observed practices are organized into six categories and a change of paradigm is proposed for further actions.

INTRODUCTION

By definition, the intention of digital inclusion initiatives is to 'bring to the network' minority groups which face enormous difficulties in acquiring and using ICTs. Whether target groups wish to be included or whether they understand how to be included, remains questionable. Those who design digital and social inclusion projects and policies simply assume that all groups want 'to be included' in the same way.

Often there is a disparity between the supposed and the true needs and desires of minority groups. The cultural values and beliefs inherent in the configuration of the technologies themselves are frequently alien to the target public

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61520-799-2.ch008

of the initiatives. This creates fertile ground for unexpected forms of appropriation of ICTs, reported in previous literature as deviant modes. Supposedly undesirable attitudes towards ICTs are often interpreted as an incapacity on the part of the target populations. This chapter proposes that, in many cases, the difference between the way the minorities appropriate and use ICTs and the initial expectations of the groups which provide them with access is misunderstood. The achievement of broad objectives, such as the increase of technical literacy, general knowledge and critical capacity, remains unnoticed, leading to negative interpretations of fruitful outcomes.

A revision of attitudes of previous policies and initiatives is a necessary first step in addressing the issue.

BACKGROUND

A considerable part of the literature about the digital divide presents results and discusses outcomes of existing initiatives. Many such texts propose methods to increase the success of future actions. Some examples from different parts of the world include: the examination of a community-based ICT project in New Zealand by Crump & McIlroy (2003); Menou, Poepsel & Stoll's review of the situation of community tele-centers in Latin America (2004); and Kumar's considerations of the diffusion and use of tele-centers in rural India (2006).

Other authors propose new ways as a guide for future initiatives. Examples are the comparison of the availability and use of ICTs in Californian high schools by Warschauer, Knobel & Stone (2004); and Bieber, McFall, Rice & Gurstein's proposal of a framework to help the design of community-based initiatives (2007).

A third approach questions whether it is possible to bridge the digital divide at all. This point of view focuses on the correlation between social inequality and technological exclusion by addressing the centrality of ICTs in contemporary life, but showing that it is not caused by ICTs. Thus actions to bridge the digital divide are topical remedies at best. "ICTs will not close the loopholes where investments in the education, labor and health sectors have gone awry" (West, 2006, Examining Information and Communication Technologies section, para. 9).

Those living in less dramatic conditions are not always able to take full advantage of the potential benefits of ICTs. For example, in recent years the Brazilian government, private entrepreneurs and NGOs have made considerable progress towards the dissemination of public internet access points, which doubled in number in 2007 (Bechara, 2008, p.47). The percentage of users accessing the internet in public points (49%) have surpassed those using home connections (40%) (CGI, 2008, p. 149). These positive results are challenged by Brazilian literacy indicators: in 2007, 7% of the Brazilian population were considered illiterate and more than 65% were sub-literate, that is, not able to understand and interpret longer written texts (Instituto Paulo Montenegro, 2007, p. 9). Further demographics of internet use in Brazil suggest that users of public access points are mostly young and with higher levels of education (CGI, 2008, p. 142). Many of these will be home internet users also. Because they have low speed home access or out-of-date equipment, they use public points to have better quality connections or to avoid the high cost of domestic connections, as has been reported by Barros (2008, p.8) and Lacerda (2008, p. 219-220, 246). Economic constraints are particularly important in countries where the price of hardware and software is higher and the average income is frequently lower (Gopal & Sanders, 2000).

Availability, reliability and capacity of the telecommunication infra-structure, as well as the different forms of charging for internet access, vary considerably around the world. Poor connections, outdated telephone networks, instability and interruptions in the electricity supply, significantly