

Chapter 83

The Democratic Divide

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ABSTRACT

The democratic divide, or the political participation gap in cyberspace, raises a critical social question as it suggests that new communication technologies, which are expected to contribute to the development of all humans, actually widen the political inequalities among different segments of people. Studies of the democratic divide show that human behavior in cyberspace is not equal, as individuals possess different levels of digital literacy and political motivation. The democratic divide will likely persist in a variety of forms.

INTRODUCTION

The democratic divide in cyberspace refers to the participation gap between those who use digital resources for politics and those who do not. That is, some people actively utilize the Internet and other digital technologies for such purposes as obtaining political information, mobilizing the public, engaging in policy making, donating money, and campaigning for certain causes, whereas others are just passive consumers of political opportunities available in cyberspace. The democratic divide is typically understood

as part of the digital divide, an extensive area of study that probes the inequalities concerning the access and use of digital technologies. However, one can argue that the democratic divide stands out as a special case because it is not only part of the digital divide, but also has deeper roots in traditional social science literature that deals with the issue of power distribution in society. The democratic divide, which directly concerns the uses and consequences of technologies for politics, is of great societal concern, as it suggests that the power inequalities between politically active and disengaged groups may be reproduced and reinforced in cyberspace as well as in the real world.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-0315-8.ch083

OVERVIEW

The specific idea of the democratic divide began when studies on Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) were merged with traditional political science and sociology literature during the 1990s and early 2000s, developing a new area of inquiry on how human political behavior translates into cyberspace. ICTs are a broad area of study that includes computer, telephone, and wireless technologies and networks, but social scientists tend to focus on the Internet, the most dominant of all ICTs, and its impact on politics and society. Today, leading researchers in this area include Pippa Norris at Harvard University, the United States, the first scholar who elaborately defined the concept of the democratic divide (Norris, 2001); Eszter Hargittai at Northwestern University, the United States, who focuses on individuals' digital literacy skills (Hargittai, 2002); and Jan van Dijk at the University of Twente, the Netherlands, who researches broad social inequalities in cyberspace (van Dijk, 2005).

While democratic divide research became active in recent years, the very origins of the democratic divide as well as the digital divide may be traced back to the early sociology and communication studies that chronicled humans' adoption and use of technologies. In the early twentieth century, French sociologist Gabriel Tarde (1903) proposed the idea that those who adopt new innovations have certain socio-demographic characteristics. He, for example, suggested that early adopters have more cosmopolitan attitudes. Tarde's idea was empirically tested by rural sociologists Bryce Ryan and Neal Gross (1943), who found that farmers who adopted an advanced breed of seed corn were wealthy and innovative, and they had broad interpersonal connections and mass media exposure. In the 1960s, communication scholar Everett Rogers (1962) enhanced the idea by detailing the characteristics of technology users at different stages. In the 1970s, the idea that people adopt and use technologies differently was broad-

ened by the so-called knowledge gap hypothesis (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1970), which argues that each new medium increases the inequalities between the information-rich and information-poor, and by the "Sesame Street effect," (Cook, Appleton, Conner, Shaffer, Tamkin, & Weber, 1975), which asserts that, even when everyone has equal access to media and technologies, the information gap between the haves and have-nots will not decrease because the haves typically make better use of media and technologies. An important implication of this line of study is that there exist differences or inequalities in people's adoption and use of media and communication technologies, and without successful policy initiatives, the adoption and use of such technologies often reinforces their existing socio-economic statuses. Thus, the rich become richer and the poor remain poor or even become poorer; ultimately, the smart become smarter. This observation is at the heart of the digital and democratic divides that involve peoples' differential uses of ICTs and their consequences. One significant concern is that those who are well educated, resourceful, and technologically competent make better use of ICTs, including active political engagements, whereas those who are less educated, poor, and lack technological skills become further marginalized.

During the 1990s, the above theories were crystallized into the very idea of the democratic divide. Here, one has to look at the two separate but related studies of the digital divide, as well as "electronic democracy." First, the democratic divide is often conceptualized as an extension of the more popular digital divide, whose studies have shown that access to and use of ICTs are unequal along lines of socio-economic status, gender, age, race, and geography. Initially, literature on the digital divide mostly concerned access to ICTs, chronicling which population had access to computers and the Internet and which did not (e.g., National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 1995). More recent researchers, however, argue that the digital divide is more than

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