

Chapter 4

Online Participation and Digital Divide: An Empirical Evaluation of U.S. Midwestern Municipalities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines whether government officials' deployment of resources to broaden Internet access and participation is influenced by officials' communication preferences and socioeconomic factors. The concern that the Internet explosion has alienated and marginalized some citizens from the democratic process and civic life has generated intellectual debate and led governments and other sectors to take measures to bridge the gap created by the digital divide. Although several studies have been conducted on the subject, few are yet to be done on the influence of government officials' communication preferences and socioeconomic factors on resource deployment to broaden access and participation. Drawing on the theories of technological diffusion and determinism, as well as developmental and democratic theories, we argue that officials' communication preferences and socioeconomic factors will be important in broadening Internet access and participation. Survey data, local government Web site contents and census data were analyzed. Results reveal that officials are not eager to commit resources to activities that broaden access and participation because they generally prefer to communicate with citizens via traditional channels. In addition, the sizes of the elderly and Black population, as well as the relative affluence of cities, do influence the presence of deliberative features on city Web sites.

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The purpose of this chapter is to determine whether government officials' deployment of resources to broaden Internet access and online participation are influenced by the officials' communication preferences as well as by socioeconomic factors. Well documented inequalities in access to and use of information technology (IT) such as the computer and the Internet reflect existing patterns of social stratification (Bradbrook & Fisher 2004, Bromley 2004, Steyaert 2002, Foley et al. 2003, Eamon 2004). For example, high-income, Caucasian, married, and well educated individuals have more access to IT compared to low-income, African American and Latino, unmarried, and less-educated individuals (National Telecommunications and Information Administration [NTIA] (2000, 2002).

Some scholars argue although the initial period of Internet adoption temporarily widened social inequality, this gap is narrowed at a rapid pace as the penetration of the Internet becomes saturated in society (Compaine 2001a, 2001b, Powell 2001, Tuomi 2000), and that no government intervention is necessary. Others argue the digital divide exists, cutting across socioeconomic factors, and the gap needs to be addressed to prevent it from widening (e.g. Kastsinas & Moeck 2002, Huang & Russell 2003, Mack 2001, Solomon et al. 2003, Foster 2000), and others suggest with the persistence of a digital divide for some groups in society, there is a need to examine distinctions within the digitally underserved groups, using targeted strategies tailored to the needs of subpopulations, rather than attempting to categorize the digital gap as a single entity (Lorence & Park 2008).

In recent years, several studies have examined IT access and type of use between ethnic groups (Hoffman et al. 2001), income groups (Rice & Haythorntwaite 2006, Lorence & Park 2008), age groups (Loges & Jung 2001) and education groups (PEW Internet American Life Project 2006). Despite these efforts, few studies are yet to examine

the extent to which these factors as well as city per capita income, the size of the labor force, and government officials' preference of the Internet as a communication medium do influence their deployment of resources to broaden Internet access and participation for underserved groups. In the following sections, we draw on the literature on the debate over digital divide, theories of technological diffusion and technological determinism, developmental theory, and democratic theory in order to establish a theoretical foundation to explain how government officials' communication preferences and socioeconomic factors could influence their deployment of resources to facilitate Internet access and online participation.

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE DEBATE

As the development of the information society has become an important priority for many governments around the world, issues about the disparity between the "information rich" and "information poor" have attracted much academic attention and research. The importance of this effort lies in the fact that information in today's world is regarded as an important resource for advancing education, culture, science and technology, the absence of which is an epitome for underdevelopment (Kargbo 2002). Some scholars have addressed the specific dimensions of the digital divide from racial (Mack 2001) and global (Norris 2001) to multi-dimensional aspects (Compaine 2001, Mossberger et al. 2003). Others have examined the relationship between information and telecommunication technologies (ICT) and social inclusion (Warschauer 2003), and others have addressed the digital divide as a problem of persistent inequality (Servon 2002).

Some studies suggest that unfortunately, it often seems that the explosive growth of the Internet is exacerbating the existing inequalities (Solomon et al. 2003, Menou 2001, Norris 2001, Parayil 2005, Vehovar 2001) leading some observ-

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