

Chapter 88

Beyond Digital Divide: Toward an Agenda for Change

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses how digital exclusion continues to present a serious and significant threat to the successful establishment of developed and developing countries as ‘information societies.’ Based on a review of recent research and theoretical work, the chapter considers a number of different reasons why digital exclusion remains a complex and entrenched social problem, highlighting the need to recognise the mediating role of economic, cultural, and social forms of capital in shaping individuals’ engagements with ICT. From this basis, the chapter proposes a hierarchical framework of digital exclusion based around conceptual ‘stages’ of ICT use. Using this framework, the argument is made that policymakers, technologists, and other information society stakeholders face a considerable challenge to match the social affordances of ICTs with the everyday needs, interests, and desires of individuals. In this sense, digital exclusion continues to demand a complex set of policy responses which go far beyond simply increasing levels of hardware provision and support, and then assuming any ‘gaps’ to have been ‘bridged.’ The chapter concludes by highlighting a number of possible directions for future action.

INTRODUCTION

The ‘digital divide’ quickly became one of the political and academic ‘hot-topics’ of the 1990s. A series of influential surveys and studies in the US and Europe highlighted a sustained empirical

picture of inequalities in the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) – in particular the computer and internet. This digital division was popularly seen as occurring between cadres of technological ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ or ‘information rich’ and ‘information poor’. Although dramatic, these initial portrayals of the

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digital divide reflected (albeit crudely) the emerging trend that, even in countries with relatively high levels of ICT use, specific social groups were significantly less likely to be engaging with new technologies.

Now, after 15 years of debate, analysis and discussion the notion of the digital divide is undergoing something of a reassessment. On one hand, some commentators are now dismissing the digital divide as a relic of the 1990s. By 2010, we are assured, “only the homeless and the jobless will be webless” (Sutherland 2004, p.7). This (re) presentation of the digital divide as ‘yesterday’s problem’ has been noticeably accelerated by the migration of the internet to platforms such as digital television and mobile telephony. In fact, it is beginning to be argued that the only digital dilemma of the 2000s is that of having *too much* access to ICTs. Thus technological enthusiasts are concerning themselves with the need to periodically disconnect themselves from information and technology (as evinced in the growing support for the ‘techno-Sabbath’ concept, where people are encouraged to take a technology-free day out every week). As Esther Dyson reasons, “it used to be you could not get enough access. [now] we just have to learn to turn it off” (cited in Townsend 2004, p.7).

Yet many other commentators see the digital divide as gaining, rather than losing, significance in contemporary society. This concern stems from the apparently persistent levels of unequal engagement with ICTs in both developed and developing nations. Against this background the chapter now goes on to address a number of objectives. Firstly, it presents a review of recent research and theoretical work in the area of digital exclusion and the digital divide, and considers a number of different reasons why digital exclusion remains a complex and entrenched social problem. Secondly, the chapter proposes a hierarchical framework of digital exclusion based around conceptual ‘stages’ of ICT use. Thirdly, the chapter considers the challenges that that policy makers, technologists

and other information society stakeholders face in formulating future policies and interventions.

BACKGROUND: THE PLACE OF ICT USE IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY SOCIETY

It is accepted by most commentators that we now live in a fast-changing ‘runaway world’ where the economic, social, cultural and political foundations of societies are being redefined on a continual basis (Giddens 2000). The much-heralded globalization of society is now apparent in a variety of forms, such as a shrinking of space, acceleration of time and reconfiguration of social relations along international lines. Although traditional structures such as the nation-state continue to play significant roles in the governance of society, their influence is increasingly being challenged by other entities such as the transnational corporation.

Most commentators also accept that this recasting of social relations is borne not only of economic, cultural and political changes but also of the changing technological world in which we are living. This is perhaps most clear in the rise of the *information society* and the attendant *knowledge economy*, where the production, management and consumption of information and knowledge are seen to now be at the core of economic productivity and societal development (Bangemann et al. 1994). Clearly, one of the key accelerators of these new forms of society and economy has been the rapid development of new telecommunications and computerized technologies over the past three decades. The global flows of data, services and people that characterize the global knowledge economy have been underpinned by information and communications technology. From e-commerce to e-government, ICTs such as the internet and other global telecommunications systems are major conduits through which contemporary society is acted out.

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