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Chapter XIX

Digital Government and the Digital Divide

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ABSTRACT

There seems to be a consensus among scholars and pundits that the lack of access to the Internet among African-Americans and Latinos has created a digital divide in the United States. The digital divide has negatively affected the ability of minority groups to accumulate social capital. This study compares Internet access rates in California and the United States in order to test the premise that race is the primary influence upon Internet access. In California, the data explicitly depicts a stronger relationship between Internet access and education and income than it does with Internet access and race.¹ Across the United States, the results are not as stark. However, education and income are increasingly becoming important variables. The policy implications of this study are dramatic. Since most governmental and non-profit efforts in the United States have put resources and money into decreasing the racial divide, this study suggests that at least some of those resources should be shifted to alleviating the educational and economic discrepancies that exist among the American people.

WHAT IS THE DIGITAL DIVIDE AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

In the last year alone, many surveys have been released that have confirmed the existence of a digital divide in this country. The General Accounting Office (2001) released a comprehensive survey stating that Internet users are more likely to be Caucasian and less likely (by a large margin) to be African-American or Hispanic.² Other recent surveys (Lenhart, 2000; U.S. Department of Commerce, 2000) have corroborated these findings.³ Therefore, the Internet digital divide may prevent ethnically disadvantaged groups from reaping the advantages of the Internet because of their lack of access to the new technology (Wilhelm, 2001).⁴

The Lenhart/PEW study found that those who do not use the Internet are less “networked” in their social lives, less trusting of government, and politically less active. When people are less networked in their everyday lives, they lack the necessary social capital to participate in their communities. Whole communities of individuals, simply based upon the color of their skin, are being disenfranchised from the political process (Putnam, 2001). Social capital, as described below, can be looked upon as the “glue” which holds together societal interests and plays a large role in the progress of any community.

The Relationship Between the Digital Divide and Social Capital

The concept of social capital has evolved greatly over the last few years. In 1988, James Coleman brought the concept into the academic mainstream with his landmark work, “Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital.” It was postulated that social capital is realized through personal networks of communication (Coleman, 1988). Social capital is a by-product of these social interactions, which enhance individual civic capacity and expertise, thereby allowing individuals to become more fully engaged in politics (Ibid.).

A dominant influence in the writings of Coleman can be found in the works of Mark Granovetter. Granovetter (1985) stated that individual socialization is best seen within the context of continuous participation in particular patterns of social networks. Individuals who are joiners appear to develop skills that make them more likely to become politically engaged in a wider range of political activities (Coleman, 2000).

Robert Putnam is credited with the contemporary revival of the debate concerning social capital.⁵ In his study about the production of social capital in modern Italy, Putnam (1993) found that communities which had high levels of social capital were also the ones that had the highest levels of political and social participation, as well as effective governance (Ibid.). The more citizens participate in their communities, the more they learn to trust each other (Brehm and Rahn, 1997).

Social capital is not an easy concept to define or measure. Perhaps the best way to display the power of social capital is by advancing its positive attributes more succinctly (Putnam, 2000). First, social capital allows citizens to resolve collective problems more easily by providing a routine and ritualized behavioral pattern based upon social norms and the networks that enforce them. Second, where people are trustworthy and subject to repeated interactions with fellow citizens, everyday business and social transactions

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