

Running head: DIGITAL DIVIDE

The Digital Divide

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Introduction

According to the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, “Isolation has been called "the most universally present problem in any discussion of information in the developing world"(1993).” Isolation, in this sense is based on the reality that developing nations and less fortunate Americans fail to acquire access to technology based communications. Technology based communications is not only e-mail, instant messaging, cell phone use, but also the important use of sending and gathering information on a global scale. Therefore, these developing nations and less fortunate Americans are “isolated” from exploiting the Information Age, while many Americans and developed countries “get ahead,” with the use of these resources. This is a general term coined the digital divide (Wikipedia Free Encyclopedia, n.d.). The gap of the digital divide inflicts many communication problems such as social class inequality, political regimes control of communication technologies, developing countries need for digital communication, and ethnic barriers sustaining, on a global scale.

Social Class Impacted by the Digital Divide

According to Guillén and Suárez, “As Castells (2001:247) concludes, "the heralding of the Internet's potential as a means of freedom, productivity, and communication comes hand in hand with the denunciation of the 'digital divide' induced by inequality on the Internet." Cementing social class and relations is managed by the digital divide, so some people say. Based on a number of research reports, the higher the socioeconomic rank of person, the more likely that person will use the communication media of the internet. Otherwise known as the “knowledge gap,” these higher class individuals who are more likely to use the mass communication technology, expand there knowledge (Guillén & Suárez, 2005). Some

interesting findings about the social class aspect of the digital divide were found in the article “Disparities in access to Internet persist,” in the publication “American Teacher:”

§ “ In 2004, about 80 percent of white children age 8 and older have Internet access at home, compared to 61 percent of African American children in this age group. Similarly, 82 percent of children whose parents have a college education have home access to the Internet, compared to 68 percent for children whose parents have a high school education or less.

§ Only 8 percent of children ages 6 months to 6 years old from families with incomes of at least \$75,000 a year did not have a home computer compared to 40 percent of children from homes with annual incomes between \$20,000 and \$29,000, and more than half (55 percent) of those from families with incomes under \$20,000 a year (2004, 2005).”

A research out of the University of California, Santa Barbara found that the likelihood of graduating high school rise 6 to 8 percent with the ability to use a home computer (DIGITAL DIVIDE, 2006). Notice the huge advantages people can receive with a home computer.

Political Regimes Impact on the Digital Divide

Relating to the global scale of the digital divide, one important theory as to why some countries are behind on internet use is based on the type of political regime that government imposes. According to Guillén and Suárez, “Our argument is that democratic political regimes enable a faster growth of the Internet than authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, controlling for economic development and income.” Information that can be obtained over the internet such a records or information exchanged from one individual to another do not go hand in hand with authoritarian or a totalitarian government. These kind of political regimes want this information

to be under their own control, whereas in a democratic society this information communication is not hindered. Communication and information sharing over the internet is fairly hard to control or stop, which brings up the thought that authoritarian, totalitarian, and dictatorship regimes would not want this mass communication machine in the internet as a means of communication, whereas the democratic liberties would allow this “free flowing” of information (Guillén & Suárez, 2005).

Authoritarian, totalitarian, and dictatorships limit internet use in a variety of ways including controlling internet networks, restricting content available to users, and threaten to arrest those who try to access forbidden information. For example, North Korea does not allow internet access and Cuba restricts access to select university's and other educational facilities. In an effort to block out bad material that can be found over the internet, China has been trying to limit access to the internet only in cyber cafes. In Vietnam, many people have received not so appealing prison sentences when they tried to promote democracy through the use of the internet (Guillén & Suárez, 2005). As can be seen, many authoritarian, totalitarian, and dictatorships are strongly trying to control internet use in its countries.

Developing Countries

Although these governments are trying to limit access, the internet is widely being regarded as the new medium of communication, not only in the United States but across the world. Even though the internet is being regarded as a new medium of communication, less than 10 percent of people across the globe use the internet and the gap between developed countries like the United States and developing countries like the Philippines is only widening. The use of the internet compared to the population of a country are quite different, ranging from around a

little over half of the people in developed countries using the net and around 1 percent of people in developing countries using the internet, according to the International Telecommunication Union.(Guillén & Suárez, 2005).

For instance, take the case of information communication technologies in the Philippines, which ranks 67th out of 104 “network ready” countries. The horrible history of poverty in the Philippines eliminates most of its members from being able to access and use information communication technologies such as the computer. Based on the World Stats portal, internet penetration in the Philippines is only 9.3 percent, which then shows that only around 2.4 percent of the Philippines population use the internet. Pretty staggering considering Singapore and Malaysia contain 68.3 and 37.9 internet penetration rates. The low internet use is based on the two different researches showing the number of personal computer penetration in the country. Even though the lack of internet and personal computer penetration rates are low, mobile communication through the use of mobile phones have risen dramatically. Compared to 2000 when only two in 25 Filipinos used cell phones, that number has changed from every two Filipinos to 5, massive communication changes. At least some part of information communication technologies are growing in the country (Calucag, 2006).

Ethnic Barriers

Communication through the use of the internet may break down barriers between ethnicity and contribute to a trans-ethnic culture (Mazrui, Ala. & Mazrui, Ali., 2001). Some people think of this new medium of communication as a key to a “smaller, more open world (Guillén & Suárez, 2005). As known throughout history, the innovation of the telephone transformed the way society communicated, as does the internet and computers.

Mobile Phones and the Digital Divide

Just as important as not being able to access a computer and the internet, another communication problem dealing with the digital divide is the minority of people across the world without mobile phones. According to Portio Research, by the year 2011 half of the people across the globe will still be without the capability of a mobile phone. They go on to report that America will be just ahead of Mexico as the sixth fastest growing number of cell phone users. Some of the more faster growing regions as supplied by Portio Research are China and Africa (Digital divide problem, 2006). Because of the limited communication resources, some believe that the mobile telephone will be the instrument to help bridge the digital divide gap. It could be said that mobile phone use and diffusion in a developing country is the most important digital technology factor in developing its economy (Economist.com, 2005). Mobile phones help boost the gross domestic product in a developing country, a research by the London Business School says (Business: Calling poverty, 2005). Unlike the computer and internet, more poor people have mobile phones based on there economic issues, and if they can not read, they can still use a mobile phone. This allows for a countries economy to develop in many ways. The mobile phone, otherwise known as the cell phone, allows business to be completed without traveling, easier business transactions, and basically opening up thousands of opportunities. For example, in Bangladesh deals between two people or companies to find the best prices in there market can be done easily over the telephone. In Zambia, payments are made over the mobile phone. The United Nations reports that there mark for 2015 is to have 50% access across the globe. Market competition, liberalizing the telecommunications industry in developing countries will help promote the use of mobile phones in the country, which in turn would help strengthen and build

the developing country's economy (Economist.com, 2005). Even though half of the population is still without a mobile phone, it can be seen as the "pocket answer" to the digital divide.

Combating the Gap

Students located in low-class levels or in rural areas may only be able to connect to the "world" through the use of a library (Barack, 2005). Such efforts to bridge the digital divide are being done by Rey Ramsey and his organization called One Economy. One Economy is an organization that helped many low-income families in the New York City area to get connected to the internet (Tanangachi, 2005). In 2005, SBC helped to bridge the digital divide gap by donating \$25,000 to a program called Project CLIMB, which helped put computers and access to the internet to many low-income families around the Cleveland area (Linus, 2005). Market competition is also another theory that would drive down the cost of accessing the internet and therefore lowering the digital divide gap, according to Consumer Union. (Market competition Web). An organization in South Africa, bridges.org, attempts to bridge the digital divide gap by attempting to teach and encourage the use of information communication technologies. G8's Digital Opportunity Task Force brings in professionals to discuss what ways key factors can be focused on and solved (Peters, 2003). Nonetheless, the gap needs to be lower over time and not gain more momentum.

Conclusion

As can be seen, there are many factors for the discrimination that is known as the digital divide. We looked at how social rank, the type of government, lack of accessibility for millions of people, and mobile phones fuel the digital divide. We also took into account some of the ways that corporations and organizations are helping to bridge the gap, including the use of the

mobile telephone. Based on this research, the lack of the ability to gain access to information communication technology devices for millions of people across the not only our country, but across the world is a problem that every government should not take lightly. Information communication technology is vital for development on both the macro(economy) and micro(1 person). Any way for a local to federal community to adopt these communication technologies should be implemented to help bridge the digital divide.

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