

## Chapter 63

# Reconciling Culture and Digital Literacy in the United Arab Emirates

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### ABSTRACT

*For a number of years, there has been a concerted effort by the United Arab Emirates to take a prominent role in introducing e-business initiatives throughout the Gulf region, and this effort has translated into widespread access of internet technology for its own citizens. The country, in setting out to become a hub for foreign and domestic companies, realized that to achieve these goals it must provide appropriate e-business frameworks and infrastructures, which it has successfully done. Although, while not the only means of acquiring digital literacy, regular exposure to the internet does contribute to gaining these necessary 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. It might be expected that with such widespread access to the internet the population would contribute to becoming digitally competent. Using an ethnographic case study methodology, this paper investigates issues contributing to what might be a new form of digital divide; cultural issues which limit the acquisition of such digital skills.*

### INTRODUCTION

As we pass into the second decade of the third millennium the internet has proven to be one the most exceptional innovations to date, with the World Wide Web affecting cultural, social and economic sectors, in both the way we spend our daily lives and in the way we do business. It has brought a wealth of information to our fingertips while heavily improving our educational system in an organized, efficient and effective manner, as well as enhancing our interpersonal relationships. The strategic potential of the medium was recognized well over a decade ago by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) who stated:

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*Our generation stands on the very cusp of the greatest technological revolution that mankind has ever faced. Some compare this age of electronic communication with the arrival of the Guttenberg press, or with the industrial revolution. Yet this revolution when it has run its course may have a greater impact on the planet than anything that has preceded it (OECD, 1997).*

Referring to the internet, Prensky (2001) makes the case that people seeking wisdom will need the use of digital technologies to provide them with unprecedented access to data, information, and knowledge from across the globe. Yet how one uses, filters, and eventually applies these resources will play an important role in the wisdom of their decisions and judgments (Skiba, 2010).

Though within the UAE widespread e-government services are available, there has been no systematic or widespread education of the general population on the use and benefits of internet usage in the country. Even though access to internet facilities is at a level comparative to both the US and UK (see Figure 1 & Table 1) and is the highest in the Arab world (see Figure 2) many of its citizens have thus failed to understand how to use the medium effectively (Jewels et al., 2009).

Based on autoethnographic observations and anecdotal evidence, UAE internet usage patterns appear to be clearly different from usage patterns of similarly advanced nations. Though the operational benefits of using the internet are generally understood by its citizens, there are many families who are still concerned enough about the medium's more sinister ramifications to effectively curtail its use in the home. In order to effectively navigate the multidimensional and fast-paced digital environment, the term digital literacy has supplanted the traditional meaning of the term literacy (Jones-Kavalier & Flannigan, 2006). UAE children, the so-called 'digital natives' that Prensky (2001) refers to, may in this situation be limited from acquiring all the skills that will ultimately contribute to them being digitally literate in a global environment.

Understanding why this type of paradox exists may be useful in providing alternative means of attaining digital literacy in culturally sensitive situations. The anecdotal evidence indicates there are many parents in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) today who are skeptical about the access to undesirable information via the Internet. They see themselves in a quandary: whether or not allowing their children to use the internet is the right thing to do; whether shutting the internet out of their lives might be the safest way to protect their children. It may be said that digital literacy and its partner digital competence in the Internet age are as important as traditional literacy was in the past. The ability to read and write, while still necessary for full engagement in a digital world may be, on its own, no longer sufficient.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The term digital literacy does not only deal with the ability to communicate but "to create, to manipulate, to design, to self-actualize" (Jones-Kavalier & Flannigan, 2006). Becta (2010) describes the term more simply as "the combination of skills, knowledge and understanding that young people need to learn in order to participate fully and safely in an increasingly digital world". Digital competence on the other hand has been defined by Cartelli (2005) as consisting of being able to explore and face new technological situations in flexible ways. He adds that digital competency allows us to analyze, select and critically evaluate data and information, to exploit technological potentials in order to represent and to solve problems, and to build shared and collaborative knowledge, while fostering awareness of one's own personal responsibilities and the respect of reciprocal rights/obligations. A relatively new term

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