

Chapter 4.8

Bridging the Digital Divide: Developments in Scotland

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ABSTRACT

Examined in this chapter is action to address the “digital divide,” and possibilities for extending e-democracy to support wider democratic participation using ICT in local communities. We describe current approaches in Scotland for tackling the digital divide, and we discuss the concept of wired communities. We also refer to “Digital Scotland” initiatives, and we outline the aims and expected outcomes from Scotland’s “Digital Communities” projects. Finally, we suggest how action research could extend electronic democratization into the two digital communities being created in Scotland. The research work we suggest would provide a framework in which to better appreciate the significance of technology in supporting e-democracy at local community levels, and in so doing, contribute knowledge to strategy and planning policies and social and digital inclusion agendas in Scotland.

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE CONTEXT

For several years, a central worry in many countries has been that unequal access, lack of proper infrastructure, and low adoption of technology, such as the telephone, computer, and the Internet, create a digital divide that excludes many—particularly those in already socially excluded groups and communities—from the perceived benefits of the Information Society. This breach is often described as “the gap between those who have access to and can effectively use new information and communication tools, such as the Internet, and those who cannot.”¹ For some time now, the Information Society vision in many countries has been accompanied by knowledge of risk and strategies to close the digital divide.

Anyone whose circumstances disconnect them from the knowledge economy is in danger of becoming part of the digital divide. They can be individuals, communities, employed people,

and unemployed people. Until relatively recently, the digital divide was taken to mean the divide existing between those who had access to ICTs and those who did not have access to ICTs. This simple “have” and “have-nots” access definition attracted considerable criticism, for example, by Wilhelm (2000). He refuted the notion that the information underclass can be defined in terms of access. He argued strongly against the previous definitions given by, for example, Raab et al. (1996) and Civile (1995). He claimed that what remains missing from these definitions is the broader context of a person’s information-seeking behavior, media use patterns, and cultural and environmental contexts.

Research conducted on behalf of the Greater London Authority (Foley et al., 2002) outlined a strategy to address the digital divide in London. Highlighted in the report was the fact that the digital divide is not just about socioeconomic factors. Although low income, low levels of education, low-skilled jobs, unemployment, and lack of technology skills are barriers to the adoption and use of ICTs, the research also highlighted sociopersonal factors as important. These factors include low levels of awareness, interest, understanding, and acceptance of ICTs. The report concluded that, to date, most research has centered on the socioeconomic elements, and that research on the sociopersonal elements has been neglected. The report contained an extensive bibliography on the digital divide.

A number of innovative initiatives are underway in the United Kingdom to address the digital divide, but at this point in time, it is too early to say whether, and to what extent, they will achieve their objectives. Research in this area is relatively new, and the information that is known mainly comes from quantitative surveys concerning use by gender, age, or location. There is little empirical data relating to how and why

people use ICTs. Long-term research programs are needed to address these issues.

Similarly, the OECD (2000) reported:

Across the OECD, attention is focusing increasingly on what has been dubbed the “digital divide”—a term that refers to the gaps in access to information and communication technology (ICT). The stakes are high, as ICT is now integral to the social fabric and is the catalyst for “new economies” to emerge. Exclusion threatens the ICT “have-nots,” whether individuals, groups or entire countries... The evidence shows that ICT can be the solution to inequalities rather than their cause—digital diversity and opportunity rather than digital divide.

Norris (2001) and others noted the views of pessimists who fear an escalation of existing inequalities and optimists who hold that new ICTs have potential to widen opportunities for more democratic participation. Many countries are taking an optimistic view, promoting new technologies for their perceived benefits. While actual outcomes are yet unknown, one hope is that with support, the barriers to civic participation not yet overcome by engagement with previous communication media may be addressed by the arrival of new ICTs and possibilities for more horizontal communication. First, however, the problem of the digital divide must be tackled.

In this chapter, the digital divide is discussed mainly from a Scottish perspective. In this section, we presented some background to the digital divide and focused on what it is and what it is not. In the second section, we look at European and UK initiatives to address this issue. The remainder of the chapter focuses on the digital divide in Scotland and the particular issues this brings to a small nation of just over five million people spread over just under eight million hectares of land.

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