

Chapter 2

Digital or Information Divide: A New Dimension of Social Stratification

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ABSTRACT

In different regions of the world, the growth in home broadband adoption and development of e-services depends on a number of factors which can decrease digital divide in size or can result in widened “gaps” between developed and developing economies as well as between rich and poor regions or social groups. These factors comprise both drivers of, and barriers to, development of broadband access and growth of e-services as well as human communication and digital interactions in terms of comprehension and relationship building (i.e., the successful collaboration in contemporary society). Using a human communication point of view, this chapter provides insight into a concept of information divide, specifies the distinction between digital and information divide, examines each of the factors that condition the mass-market broadband adoption, and considers the impact of techno economic stratification for the development of web-based e-services.

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INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, the rapid development and explosive growth of digital ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) has changed the traditional boundaries between media and communications (Corazza, 2008). Simultaneously, the public increasingly use different devices (e.g. mobile phones and PDAs, desktops, notebooks, and tablet PCs, connected via diverse access network technologies) to access the Internet. In this scenario, the ability to deal with new challenging applications and multimedia services becomes a necessity (Ginesi, 2008). This brings about new and complex challenges for modern society, i.e. it assumes a world in which people are surrounded by mobile or fixed devices in a computing environment that supports them in almost everything they do (Horrigan, 2008). Fast and rapid communication remains a hot issue for the entire global world. In acknowledging this global application, there exists even more challenge of a for people in some regions (e.g. remote and rural areas), because tremendous development and revolutionary change in communication have not yet provided optimistic solutions for such areas (Hulicki, 2008a). Wireless communication and portable computing devices have become inseparable parts of our lives, moderating communication needs. However, the gap of communication abilities remains a challenge for telecom network operators and service providers in many regions and communities. Besides the technological constraints and forces, there are a number of barriers and factors which constrain development of broadband access and proliferation of Web-based e-services, and result in the slower development of national, regional, or local economies (Marine & Blanchard, 2004), (A Digital Agenda for Europe, 2010). Such barriers can lead to and increase the abovementioned gap that is often called the “digital divide” (Luise, 2008). Such a gap (or gaps) can be observed across the various countries of the European Union, within one country, or within one region, shown in Figure 1.

However, there is a strong illusion behind the definition of this term as a single gap in access to and usage of ICTs (Hulicki, 2008b). In fact, most people initially perceive this terminology deficit and refer to connectivity problems (Gupta, 2006), (Skowroński, 2006). Later, the concept of digital or technological divide evolved from the economic stratification in the availability of ICTs, to the inequality or differences in QoE (Quality of the user Experience) (Hulicki, 2008b), (EE Report, 2010). Hence, the concept of digital divide is more of a new label and less of a unique concept or gap. Unlike the traditional notion, it can serve as an indicator of the new techno-economic stratification of households, communities, businesses, and geographic areas.

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