

Chapter 65

Governing Digital Divides: Power Structures and ICT Strategies in a Global Perspective

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ABSTRACT

A great part of the rhetoric accompanying the rapid diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in Western societies in recent decades has put the spotlight on their potential for generating economic growth and development in the socio-political arena. Yet mechanisms that generate disparities among citizens do not go away with the advent of electronic citizenship, as asymmetric access to economic and political resources limit access to new technologies. This contribution will be divided in three sections. In the first part, the concept of “digital divide” will be analysed by considering its first formulation in the US political debate during the Nineties, as well as the more recent efforts to consider the multidimensional nature of such category. In the second section significant quantitative measure of digital disparities between countries will be provided. Finally, it will show how developing countries adopting proprietary softwares are becoming dependent on the power of providers of ICT goods and services, which are mainly concentrated in the United States.

INTRODUCTION: UNIVERSAL PROMISES, DIGITAL INEQUALITIES

A great part of the rhetoric accompanying the rapid diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in Western societies in recent

decades has put the spotlight on their potential for generating economic growth and development in the socio-political arena. New forms of media are regarded to perform a similar role in countries with very different traditions and history. More important, new digital infrastructures are supposed to be capable of accelerating developmental prospects for the poorest regions of the world, as

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they facilitate “all types of economies (developed, developing and in transition) to bring benefits of the emerging global information society to the largest possible part of their respective populations ...” (World Bank, 2002, preface). Other universal promises regard the spread of socio-political rights. The myth of “information revolution” has shaped the Western social imagination by presenting a “timeless and borderless world” where also the inhabitants of territories located on the fringes and in backward areas would access a new form of citizenship (Mosco, 2004).

Electronic citizenship – given its immaterial nature – seems to open up new opportunities to citizens exercising those rights that have remained only in constitutional charters in the past, or to claim new kinds of rights (Barlow, 1996; Bollier, 2008). Yet, the history of citizenship shows, in different forms, the fundamentally exclusive nature of this category, replicating the causes of the gaps existing between and within countries (Wallerstein, 2006). Mechanisms that generate disparities among citizens do not go away with the advent of electronic citizenship: asymmetric access to economic and political resources limit access to new technologies; differences in levels of education exclude a relevant part of the population from the use of the Internet. Digital citizenship encounters obstacles quite similar to those met during the initial phase of (pre)-electronic citizenship (Mossberger, Tolbert & McNeal, 2007).

Research shows, indeed, that the diffusion of ICTs varies territorially, mainly in the wake of wealth distribution, among other variables¹. This consideration would corroborate the view of those reading the rhetoric over IS as a facade covering the restructuring of the capitalist economy at the global level and arguing that the diffusion of ICTs, based on an unequal model of development, further strengthens rather than reduces territorial and socio-economic divides between the center and outer fringes. Notwithstanding the many promises of ICTs, a report published by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development in 2006

shows that a person in a high-income country was 22 times more likely to use the Internet than someone in a low-income country (Unctad, 2006). In addition, a recent report by the United Nations (2008) has confirmed the limits of digital policies as a global project. The emergence of new technologies may provide limited reason for optimism, given the persistent disparities among countries. It has been calculated that 67% of Internet users were from Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, where nearly 14% of world population lives. Adding to this, it can be observed that the lack of a global policy encouraging the development of poorest nations constitutes a key question. Digital policy at the global level represents an “opportunity for all”, or a new way for liberalizing markets in less advantaged countries? Does it create a new international balance or simply reinforces age-old dependencies?

Newly found chasms can be observed between different geopolitical areas emerging following the diffusion of digital technologies. Although digital divide is often considered politically neutral, a map of powers structure in Internet governance will suggest a quite different interpretation, leading to consider a new geography of cyberspace (Amoretti, 2009). Disparities have to be accounted for as the product of the strategies of specific actors that continue to reproduce socio-economic and political divisions among developed and poorer countries, operating control and regulation on different levels of the Internet.

This chapter is divided into three sections. In the first part, the concept of “digital divide” is analysed by considering its first formulation in the US political debate during the Nineties, as well as the more recent efforts to consider the multidimensional nature of such category. This helps to overcome the bipolar meaning of “digital divide” based on the distinction between the “information haves” and the “information have-nots”. In the second section, significant quantitative measure of disparities between countries is provided. More in particular, attention is devoted to the most dif-

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