

Chapter 19

Toward Digital Inclusion: Digital Divides and New Media Literacies¹

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ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses the relationships between social inclusion and digital divide(s), mainly focusing on the conceptual frameworks that provide the basis for rethinking the relationship between technological, social, and human factors. Redefining the digital divide has deep consequences on the theoretical and empirical framework we apply to the digital divide and to the related social inclusion processes. It is widely acknowledged that the label digital divide can be partially misleading, because it is mostly emphasizing a binary dimension (haves vs. have not) and a mere technological dimension. In order to achieve a clear operational definition of the digital divide, we should avoid some misleading myths characterizing the debate and focus on the complex relationships between technological, social, and human factors (a dichotomous conceptualization, a narrow understanding of the technological factors involved, a technological deterministic approach), adopting, instead, an enabling technology approach. Therefore, the authors introduce a multilevel model for analyzing digital divides (Comunello, 2010), with a main focus on new media literacy (the model considers not only mere technology availability, but also real access, advanced reception practices, technical skills, content production, networking skills). Finally, they review some empirical methods for studying the digital divide, trying to underline how a more nuanced framework for analysing the digital divide can be adopted by empirical research.

INTRODUCTION²

The digital divide is an internationally recognized issue today: unequal diffusion of ICT (Information Communication Technology) is a problem of global relevance in a world where social systems were radically changed by Information Technology. Knowledge, production, finance, education, social and

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political relations are affected by this technological revolution. Nevertheless, the presence of such technologies has created new social inequalities.

Providing a specific definition of the digital divide is a complex task. Scholars have been trying to identify specific dimensions in order to analyse such increasing gaps in the distribution of ICT (Servon, 2002). These do not only refer to differences between the North and the South of the world, but also to differences to be identified within the more developed societies: the so-called social divide (Norris, 2001). Such inequalities are determined by geographical context (whether urban or rural), socio-economic status, educational level and ethnic origins. The digital divide has been originally identified with disparities in technology access, dividing so-called haves and have not, according to a binary logic that could be applied to either subjects or countries (James, 2003). Afterwards, the concept of the digital divide underwent a conceptual and empirical transformation. Digital divide today is a multifaceted concept, embracing to a number of dimensions: not only technology access, but also literacy, contents and services are other important elements to be considered (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman & Robinson, 2001; Gunkel, 2003; Warschauer 2003, 2007).

Theoretical and empirical experiences made it possible to modify the frameworks used for analysing the digital divide in the international context. Scholars underline that ‘standard recipes’ cannot be applied to different contexts: in order to reduce the gap between technologically advanced countries and poorer ones, a context-aware framework has to be adopted (Rodriguez & Wilson, 2000; Wilson 2004; Wilson & Wong, 2007).

Equally, when addressing so-called intra moenia divide (the social divide, in Norris’ 2001 words), the analysis has gradually shifted from a quantitative approach, aimed at detecting the presence of ICT and its availability to individuals, to a qualitative approach, aimed at identifying to what extent the lack of such technologies is heavier for the disadvantaged. Nowadays, scholars are focusing on how ICT can contribute to reducing social marginalization (social exclusion) and to increase community cohesion (social inclusion).

The main objective of this work is to highlight how ICT can strengthen the processes of social inclusion. In contemporary societies, both social inclusion and social exclusion are not only based on economic marginalization, but also on relational and cultural exclusion; the cohesion of a social system is highly dependent on the participatory dimension, from both a civic and political perspective. Moreover, socio-cultural integration strongly depends on how inclusive the social context is.

In order to operationalise such theoretical concerns, we will introduce a multilevel model for analysing the digital divide, focusing not only on technology access, but also on digital literacy. We will also review some empirical methods for studying the digital divide, trying to underline how empirical research can benefit from a more nuanced framework for analysing the digital divide.

ACCESS AND BEYOND: ENABLING TECHNOLOGIES³

It is widely recognized that, after more than 15 years of debates, the very notion of the digital divide needs to be reconsidered (Selwyn & Facer, 2010). A rising number of scholars are questioning the label digital divide, adding in their books’ titles expressions like rethinking, redefining, reconceptualizing or beyond (Warschauer, 2003, 2007; Mossberger, Tolbert & Stansbury, 2003, etc.), or proposing the idea of a second order digital divide (Hargittai, 2002; van Dijk & van Deursen, 2010), going beyond the dichotomous first order conception; others introduce new concepts, such as digital inequality (DiMaggio

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