Chapter XIV
The Existential Significance of the Digital Divide for America's Historically Underserved Populations

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ABSTRACT

During the 1990s, the digital divide figured prominently in the discourses of academics, corporate leaders, educators, and policymakers worldwide. In the U.S., we witnessed a massive infusion of computers and Internet access in homes, schools, libraries, and other neighborhood institutions. This has significantly increased citizens' physical access to information and communication technology (ICT) artifacts and has enhanced citizens' opportunities for acquiring and strengthening technical skills. However, does increased physical access and technical skills signal closure of the digital divide? In this chapter, I address this question by describing the preconstructed ways in which the digital divide is conceptualized by academics and policymakers, and inferring what these conceptualizations suggest about the existential significance of the digital divide as experienced by historically underserved groups in the U.S.

INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies (ICT), such as the World Wide Web, e-mail, and computers, have become an integral part of America's entertainment, information, and communication culture. Corporations and government agencies increasingly are offering products, services, and information online. Educational institutions are integrating ICT in their curriculum and are offering courses from a distance. Indeed, over the past decade, ICT has become indispensable for many middle- and upper-class American households (Hoffman, Novak, & Venkatesh, 2004). However, government analysts warn that historically underserved populations such as low-income households, racial and ethnic minorities, and older and disabled Americans may continue to be distinctly disadvantaged if this divide is not closed, because American economic and social life increasingly is becoming networked through the Internet (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1995).

The *digital divide* is the term used to describe disparities in ICT access. These gaps in access generally formed along the longstanding and systemic fault lines of race, gender, age, income, physical and mental ability, and spatial location. Since the National Telecommunications and Information Administration released its first digital divide report in 1995, access to ICT has increased for most American citizens, but does this mean that the digital divide has been bridged? Is further research in this area warranted, or has the digital divide become passé?

The answer to questions such as these is determined largely by the manner in which the digital divide is conceptualized by academics and policymakers. If we conceptualize the digital divide as a gap in access and skills, then the common technology-centric solutions of increasing public access facilities and training are perhaps sufficient. However, common technology-centric solutions seem limited as we shift the discussion of the digital divide from gaps to be overcome by providing equipment and skills to social development challenges to be addressed through the effective integration of technology into communities, institutions, and societies. Effective integration of ICT requires consideration of the ability of historically underserved groups to access, adapt, and create knowledge using ICT (Warschauer, 2002).

In this chapter, I delve more closely into the question of the existential significance of the digital divide as experienced by historically underserved groups in the U.S. Existentialists embrace the human emotional experience of life and believe that experiences significantly influence human decision making. From an existential perspective, while broader physical access to computing artifacts is important and necessary for bridging the digital divide, the decision to adopt and use ICT is largely a matter of the meanings, values, and experiences of the individual. In what follows, I begin first by reviewing major issues and controversies in digital divide research and conclude with recommendations.

BACKGROUND

The digital divide is an ambiguous term, which contributes to the difficulty in developing effective policy responses. McSorley (2003) argues that the concept of the digital divide has gained some ascendancy precisely because of its central ambiguity; that it can mean all things to all people at once and, hence, mobilize a diverse community of interests. Without conceptual clarity, it is difficult to develop effective policy interventions because there is no solid understanding of the problem at hand, how it can be measured, how it can be tackled, or how it can be prevented.

Contemporary interest in the digital divide is due largely to coverage in government and foundation reports, newspapers, broadcast news, and popular magazines. Our understanding of the digital divide is based largely on survey data. For instance, U.S. households have experienced a rapid gain in computer and Internet access with two million new Internet users per month. In September 2001, 143 million Americans (54%) were using the Internet, and 174 million Americans (66%) used computers (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2002). The gains are largest for low-income families (those earning less than $15,000 per year, which increased at a 25% percent annual growth rate vs. 11% for households earning $75,000 and above) and underrepresented ethnic and racial minorities (33% for blacks; 30% for Hispanics; 20% for whites, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders). American Internet users also are engaged in a wide variety of activities—45% use e-mail, 36% use the Internet to search for products and services, 39% make online purchases, and 35% search for health information (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2002). Thus, the U.S. is experiencing a persistent but closing gap in computer and Internet access along the lines of ethnicity and race, geographic location, household composition, age, education, and income level (Hoffman & Novak, 1998; Lenhart, Rainie, Fox, Horrigan, & Spooner, 2000; Lenhart, et al., 2003; Mossberger,

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