
Chapter II

Digital Divides: Their Social and Ethical Implications

Emma Rooksby
Charles Sturt University, Australia

John Weckert
Charles Sturt University, Australia

ABSTRACT

This chapter considers the social and ethical significance of digital divides, where a digital divide is taken to be an intra- or international inequality in levels of access to information and communication technologies. The authors argue that digital divides are not necessarily morally objectionable in themselves. Digital divides are instead morally objectionable to the extent that they create, perpetuate or exacerbate morally objectionable conditions of other sorts, such as material deprivation, or abridgement of liberty. The authors also propose a method for assessing the moral significance of digital divides. They hope that the chapter will help analysts of inequalities in access to information and communication technologies to provide more specific accounts of the moral harms caused by instances of such inequalities.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter addresses three important questions about the nature and moral significance of digital divides. The three questions to be addressed are the following: First, what is a digital divide? Second, what empirical features determine the moral status of a digital divide? And third, why are social inequalities morally undesirable anyway? Digital divides, while fairly easy to characterize in terms of the distribution of technologies within a society, are far more difficult to assess in terms of their moral significance. Not all digital divides are morally significant. Further, the moral significance of a digital divide will depend on empirical features of the divide beyond the distribution of technologies, as well as on social context. These facts have implications for policy approaches to digital divides: policy approaches to the digital divide should be established, for particular regions, prior to substantial empirical investigation of whether and to what extent inequalities in access to ICTs are creating morally objectionable social impacts.

The approach used in this chapter is that of analytic moral philosophy. The chapter also draws on empirical research, including qualitative research conducted by the authors on attitudes towards the Internet among members of socially disadvantaged groups.

A word about the origin and uses of the term “digital divide” is in order before we present any argument. The term “digital divide” originated as a catchphrase to describe inequalities in access to information and communication technologies (ICTs), usually among members of some specified nation or community. It has been most commonly used to describe societies in which some portion of the population has access to Internet-related technologies and the remainder does not. The term normally carries normative “overtones,” for instance an assumption that it is morally or socially undesirable for a society to be characterized by a digital divide.

The term “digital divide” is also used to describe inequalities in access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) between different communities or nations; it is often altered to “global digital divide” in such contexts. Again, the term carries some normative overtones.¹ However, the “global digital divide” is a comparatively unexplored topic, with much of the literature in this area drawing on literature from national or sub-national contexts, within particular developed countries.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a burgeoning literature on the digital divide. Most contributions attempt to characterize digital divides, and to provide policy guidelines on how they might be reduced or removed from a society. However, there is some

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