

Chapter 3

Digital Divide, Social Divide, Paradigmatic Divide

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ABSTRACT

The digital divide is nothing else than the reflection of the social divide in the digital world. The use of ICT for human development does offer opportunities to reduce the social divide for individual beings or communities; yet there exists a series of obstacles to overcome. The very existence of an infrastructure for connectivity is only the first obstacle, although it often receives an exclusive focus, due to the lack of an holistic approach which gives an essential part to digital and information literacy. Telecommunications, hardware and software are predictable prerequisites; however, the true pillars of human-focused information societies are education, ethics, and participation, interacting together as a systemic process. As long as decision makers are not ready to consider these evidences, and keep on favoring a mere technological vision, we will suffer from the most dangerous divide in terms of impact: the paradigmatic divide. Any resemblance to characters, projects, or policies in real life is quite intentional.

INTRODUCTION

In 2000, the G8 initiated the “Dot Force”, i.e. “Digital Opportunity Task Force” (United Nations, 2000) to raise international awareness on the subject. Since then, a concept has prevailed: the fight against the digital divide is a priority

because ICT offers many possibilities for development for people, as well as for communities and countries. The concept of ICT for development (ICT4D) is now used by many international, regional and national organizations, and by all sectors (international, governmental, corporate, civil society, and the academy). We all share the same belief that the use of ICT for development holds very important promises.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-497-4.ch003

Yet, this is only a belief. Although it appears very credible, it remains a belief, because the highly remarkable lack of an impact evaluation has prevented the results of ICT4D projects in the last two decades from being clearly stated. The belief sometimes becomes myth or magic... for instance when one thinks that the mere fact of connecting a person to the Internet is going automatically to initiate a process causing this person to escape his/her situation of poverty.

In this article, my contention will be that this belief reveals a serious *lack of perspective*, ignoring that the digital divide is no more than the reflection of the social divide (Pimienta, 2002) in the virtual world. I will also demonstrate that there is an error of both focus and approach, which has very serious consequences when it comes from decision makers in the public arena. Field observers can see indeed that some projects seem to have positive impacts whereas others are never completed or do not have noticeable impacts. What are the criteria which allow the former to be distinguished from the latter? Can we identify the components that make it possible for public policies on the Information Society or ICT4D projects to produce positive impacts on the society?

I would like to make an hypothesis about the criteria, as well as to bring some elements to the analysis which are likely to sustain the hypothesis. The main hypothesis is that the crucial element is the approach; it matters more than being efficient in the ways policies are designed and projects are managed.

- An approach based on technology has every possibility of ending in failure for both policies and projects.
- An approach based on contents and applications will guarantee products but may fall short when it comes to the desired societal changes.

- An approach based on paradigm shift is the key to success in obtaining a positive societal impact.

My final objective is to show that maximum concentration is required on the education component that must support the policy or the project. The task related to digital and information literacy is both a priority, which is seldom fully considered in policies and projects, and an extraordinary challenge, considering the size it should have to reach the whole society. The greatest strategic element for the transformation towards information societies is education of the citizenship in the digital world as well as paradigm shifts linked to a new vision of society based on knowledge sharing. Be that as it may, the bottleneck lies in the decision makers' awareness and in the negative multiplying effects of their decisions when they have not adopted or not understood the correct approach (and its natural implications regarding the importance that multi-stakeholder partnership deserves).

These facts suggest that in addition of the social divide which lies behind the digital divide, there exists another divide which is not so clearly visible, that is not properly taken care of, and whose effect on the digital divide is still greater: the paradigmatic divide. This divide exists when decision makers in the field of the information society start from an erroneous approach, and keep on working within the logical framework of a previous societal paradigm, where society does not participate in the decision process.

ANTECEDENTS

This article compiles and synthesizes elements that come from several speeches delivered at international conferences on the information society in recent years (Pimienta & alt., 1993-2007). It is based on a series of concepts that were elaborated or collectively discussed (MISTICA Virtual

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