

Chapter IV

Tracking the Digital Divide: Studying the Association of the Global Digital Divide with Societal Divide

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ABSTRACT

The chapter is based on a study of global municipal Web portals conducted through a collaboration between the E-Governance Institute at Rutgers-Newark, USA, and the Global e-Policy e-Government Institute at Sungkyunkwan University in Seoul, South Korea. The joint study ranked municipalities worldwide based on their scores in five e-governance categories of security and privacy, usability, content, services and citizen participation. Crucial trends in the development of the municipal Web portal indicate a growing digital divide between cities belonging to the OECD and non-OECD nations. This chapter attempts to understand the correlates of this divide, by exploring the association of this digital divide to other divides - social, political, economic and literacy divides among nations, particularly those between OECD and non-OECD nations.

INTRODUCTION

The dawn of the information age and the growth of Internet have led to governments increasingly computerizing their services to citizens around the globe. Governments are transforming into e-governments with public information and

services increasingly offered online. This phenomenon is broadly referred to as e-government. “E-government, the application of ICT within public administration to optimise its internal and external functions, provides government and business with a set of tools that can potentially transform the way in which interactions take place, services are delivered, . . . and citizens participate

in governance...” (UNDESA, 2003, 1). According to Liikanen (2003, 5) e-government is defined as “the use of information and communication technology in public administrations combined with organizational change and new skills in order to improve public services and democratic processes and strengthen support for public policies”. Norris defines e-government as “...the delivery of services and information, electronically, to businesses and residents, 24 hours a day, seven days a week” (2001, 5). There are three stages in introducing e-government: (1) publishing government information online; (2) interacting, where ICTs are used to encourage civic participation in government decision making; and (3) transacting, where government services are accessed online (CDT & infoDev, 2002). The internet is also a convenient mechanism for government to conduct citizen-participation exercises, with the potential to decentralize decision-making. ICTs help citizen groups to “do research on the Web, build links with online communities, host their own Websites to post reports, and make use of email to connect with their peers” (Bridges.org, 2002b).

As the use of e-government became popular, academicians have conducted research on the potential effects of e-government. A Pew Internet & American Life Project study examining how Americans contact their government found that e-government is an increasingly popular tool for online users to get information and send messages to their public officials (Horrigan, 2004). Another study by Gant & Gant (2001) finds that in a span of five years, from 1995 to 2000, the number of both public and private Web portals across the globe rose from less than 20,000 to more than 10 million.

Much of this research on the performance of e-government has focused primarily on the public agency, with less consideration of the societal impact of providing services online. Traditional methods of measuring government service, both online and offline have focused on the public official or administrative tool as the central

element. Behn’s “three big questions of public management” consider the public bureaucrat as the framework of measurement and improvement, thus ignoring the social consequences of public administration in a democratic society (Kirlin, 1996). In this context, an important consequence of the growing use of computers is the growing digital divide among nations and also within nations both developed and developing. Digital divide is not just a divide that applies to people but it can also be applicable on a larger scale to countries and states. Some countries are ranked higher while some are ranked lower on the scale measuring the degree of digital divide leading to an uneven level of participation in a networked society. Thus “the network society is creating parallel communications systems: one for those with income, education and literally connections, giving plentiful information at low cost and high speed; the other for those without connections, blocked by high barriers of time, cost and uncertainty and dependent upon outdated information” (UNDP, 1999, 63). This chapter attempts to understand the correlates of this divide, by exploring the association of this digital divide to other divides - social, political, economic and literacy divides among nations, particularly those between OECD and non-OECD nations.

BACKGROUND

The term digital divide may imply more than one meaning. In simple terms, it refers to the “gap between those people who have access to digital technologies and information on the internet, and those who do not” (Singh, 2002, 7). This refers to the “gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels with regard both to their opportunities to access information and communication technologies (ICTs) and to the use of the internet for a wide variety of activities” (OECD, 2001). Keniston (2004) classifies the divide into

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