Chapter 7.4
Challenging Digital Inequalities:
Barriers and Prospects

Norman Bonney
The Robert Gordon University, UK

Olufemi Komolafe
The Robert Gordon University, UK

Elizabeth Tait
The Robert Gordon University, UK

ABSTRACT

There are substantial inequalities in access to and use of the Internet. These inequalities build on enduring social and economic inequalities that have themselves been rooted in previous rounds of the development of electronic technologies and have largely resisted public policies designed to remedy them. Rapid developments in the use of the Internet have great potential for commercialization and democratization, but digital inequality means that this potential is not always exploited to the advantage of the poorer sectors of the community. Recent public policies have attempted to remedy digital disadvantage, but there is little evidence that they are fundamentally transforming them. Constant innovation enables the more advantaged sectors to advance their position, while many are still excluded from compensatory attempts at catch up. An increasing body of experience suggests ideas for new approaches, but the magnitude of the challenge of eroding digital inequality should not be underestimated.

INTRODUCTION

The increasing availability and use of advanced information and communications technologies (ICT) have transformed many aspects of social life, business, education, government and democracy, and enthusiasts of the new technologies perceive even more profound productive, liberating and democratizing transformations in the future. At the same time, there has been increasing concern that large sectors of national and global populations have been excluded from the benefits of these innovations and that they may be used to further entrench the position of the advantaged

and the powerful. This paper explores the mixed blessings of the ICT revolution particularly as it relates to ideas of electronic commerce (e-commerce), electronic government (e-government) and electronic democracy (e-democracy); places the analysis in a longer historical frame that helps to assess both the positive and the negative features of recent significant developments in ICT; and explores aspects of the emerging patterns of digital inequality and the challenges for policies designed to tackle them.

DIGITAL INEQUALITY

The concept of *digital inequality* is perhaps a better way of conceptualizing the issues that surround the concept of digital exclusion or the digital divide, since it is differences in degree of exposure to and use of digital technologies, rather than complete exclusion, that best summarizes the reality of the phenomenon and the ideas that motivate study in these fields. Digital inequality relates to phenomena with a much wider span than the Internet, but it is access to and use of this medium that is the subject of this chapter. Although the focus is also upon the United Kingdom, the issues that it deals with relate to other states and also, of course, have a global dimension as well.

In this chapter, it is argued that inequalities in access to and use of the Internet are additional manifestations of patterns of social, political and economic inequality that have been continually experienced by the poorer and more disadvantaged sectors of society. Poverty and inequality are relative phenomena that have been persistent features (although with varying characteristics and degrees of incidence over time) in modern societies. Constant processes of technological innovation inevitably mean that some sectors of society are better placed to take advantage of the new methods of production or service delivery and, thus, forge ahead in benefiting from them. While other sectors eventually benefit from the trickling

down of these innovations and their elaborations at a later stage, when the first-time beneficiaries or replacement innovators are moving on to benefit from yet further rounds of innovation.

Digital inequality, like social and economic inequality, is reproduced through the generations. People are born to financially resource rich or poor households or somewhere in between, and households differ in the degree to which they are able to benefit from technological and social innovation. There are also major differences in cultural resources and repertoires in these different households. The ability to benefit from formal systems of education and acquire valued educational qualifications differs greatly between them. The expansion of educational systems in the last 100 years, including the development of higher education, has only modified, in a minor way, the association between levels of education and social privilege or disadvantage. Successive governments over the last half-century have specifically attempted to remedy the educational disadvantage of poorer households, but the broad structure of social and educational disadvantage has remained the same even after a further eight years of New Labour initiatives in the field (Kelly, 2005).

Reich (1993) has distinguished between social strata in the degree to which they are able to manipulate symbol systems, arguing that advanced abilities in this respect are the key to ensuring that workers are able to take advantage of opportunities in a modern knowledge-based economy. In the present day, these differences are manifest in the use of digital technologies and the Internet. Different social class abilities to utilize and benefit from them are, thus, the most recent manifestation of much more enduring and persistent sets of major social-class differences in levels of cognitive and occupational skills and educational attainment. Just as generations of attempts to produce equality of educational opportunity have not removed the problem of educational inequality because as general educational standards are raised, some

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