Encyclopedia of New Media

Digital Divide

Contributors: Leslie Regan Shade
Editors: Steve Jones
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Digital divide refers to the gap between those who have access to the Internet (the "haves") and those who do not have access (the "have-nots"). There are several dimensions to the digital divide: the social divide, the gap between the information-rich and information-poor within nations; the global divide, the gap between industrialized and developing countries; and the democratic divide, the gap between those who use the Internet for civic participation and those who are passive consumers of Internet resources.

The term digital divide, which became widely popular in the mid-1990s, initially had a fairly simplistic definition, with access defined solely as technical access—access to computers and telecommunication services. Later, definitions of the digital divide began to encompass more complex measures of access—not just access to the technical infrastructure, but also access to the social infrastructure. The social infrastructure includes access to education and content, the ability to produce as well as consume information. A variety of socio-demographic characteristics were also recognized as increasing or inhibiting access, including income, education, gender, race, ethnicity, age, linguistic background, and location (e.g., rural vs. urban). In the North American context, efforts to ameliorate the digital divide have concentrated on setting up community access points for public spaces, such as schools and libraries. International organizations are also making efforts to decrease the digital gap in developing countries. Thus, the digital divide encompasses three main trajectories: access to information and communication technologies, access to the appropriate content, and geopolitical aspects.

Various studies, by governments, industry groups, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), have attempted to measure the digital divide. The U.S. National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) produced the first high-profile study in 1995, with the release of *Falling Through the Net: A Survey of the "Have Nots" in Urban and Rural America.* Measuring household telephone, computer, and Internet penetration rates to determine who owned telephones and personal computers and who accessed the Internet at home, the study revealed that access was related to socioeconomic and geographic factors, with the information have-nots disproportionately found in rural areas and central cities.

The NTIA's 1999 version of *Falling Through the Net*, subtitled *Defining the Digital Divide*, revealed that while more Americans are accessing the Internet, significant discrepancies in access still existed, and in some instances had widened considerably. Race is a factor, as blacks and Hispanics are less likely to be connected anywhere compared to whites at home. Education is a factor, as those with a college degree are more than 16 times more likely to have home Internet access as those with an elementary school degree. Income is a factor, as high-income urban households are more than 20 times as likely as rural, low-income households to have Internet access. Marital status is also a factor, as children in dual-parent white households are nearly twice as likely to have the Internet at home as children in white single-parent households.

The NTIA's 2000 *Falling Through the Net* report, *Toward Digital Inclusion*, looked at individual access, household access to high-speed services (such as digital subscriber lines, or DSL), and access for people with disabilities. Overall, the NTIA concluded, digital inclusion is advancing rapidly among most groups of Americans, regardless of income, education, race/ethnicity, location, age, or gender. Furthermore, those who were previously not connected are now making significant gains, particularly across education and gender lines. However, even though computer ownership and Internet access are rising rapidly for most groups, in some cases the digital divide remains the same, or has expanded slightly. This is especially the case for people with disabilities, single-parent households, and for blacks and Hispanics.

Although digital-divide studies were initially conducted in the North American context, the international promotion of electronic commerce and a liberalized telecommunication sector has led to the recognition that the digital divide also exists between and among countries. So, although the 1990s witnessed a fantastic penetration rate of the Internet in most regions of the world, other countries, such as Central and South America, have lagged behind. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Internet growth in Africa has been negligible, with 0.25 percent of Internet hosts being located there, compared to 88 percent in North America and Europe.

According to the OECD, the fundamental barrier in this case is access to basic telecommunications services, and trade liberalization and increased market competition

for telecommunications services are the mechanisms to overcome this digital divide. Trade liberalization has increased the demand for communication services, and has led to an increase in the growth of access lines (fixed and mobile), alternative access technologies, and Internet access and use, as well as to lower bandwidth prices.

Bridging the global digital divide between industrialized and developing countries is another trend. The Okinawa Charter on the Global Information Society was unveiled with much fanfare at the annual G8 summit held in Japan in the summer of 2000. There, the G8 leaders formed the Digital Opportunities Task (DOT) Force, and extended the invitation to 32 members of organizations, private industry, and nonprofits to join the DOT Force in an international effort to bridge the “international information and knowledge divide.”

A variety of public-sector and non-profit policy initiatives have been generated to close the digital divide, through technology acquisition, education, training, and lifelong learning. In the United States, the Telecommunications Act of 1996 directs the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to implement a funding mechanism—the E-rate—to bring Internet technology to public schools and libraries. Canada has several funding programs to create Internet access in public spaces, such as schools and libraries, and community access points, particularly in rural and remote areas. Corporations (including Microsoft, AT&T, Intel, Hewlett-Packard, and AOL/Time-Warner) have established foundations that help provide Internet access to local communities, typically through donations of used equipment and training.

The question of whether or not these policy fixes will eliminate the digital divide will be the basis of future research. Will the digital divide be transitory or persistent? Some contend that as the cost of computers and online access decreases, and as more schools and public institutions become wired, concerns about a digital divide will become moot. After all, there will always be areas of social stratification that no amount of public subsidy can fix. But others contend that if the assumption remains that basic computer skills are essential for economic success, and if the Internet is essential for participation in civic and cultural life, then we need to be concerned and diligent so that the information-poor will not become further marginalized.

Leslie ReganShade

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Related Topics

- Access
- Gender and New Media
- Race and Ethnicity and New Media

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