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Chapter 6

The Digital Divide

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The Digital Divide

Digital Divide refers to the gap between those who benefit from digital technology and those who do not. It is the gap between those people with effective access to digital and information technology, and those without or limited access to it. It includes the imbalances in physical access to technology, as well as the imbalances in resources and skills needed to effectively participate as a digital citizen in this so called e-world. The digital divide refers to that disparity between individuals and/or communities who can use electronic information and communication tools, such as the internet, to better the quality of their lives and those who cannot.

Several factors must be addressed when one evaluates digital divide whether globally or locally. Being digitally connected is critical to economic, educational, and social advancement. Those without the appropriate tools, in terms of personal computers (PCs) and Internet connectivity, and applicable skills will become increasingly disadvantaged.

Factors that contribute towards widening the digital divide gap:

Poverty

One of the crucial factors that affect the digital divide of countries is poverty. Developing countries suffer greatly from high levels of poverty. Consequently, they are greatly affected by digital divide internally and externally. Residents of such countries do not have the necessary finances to afford computers and internet connection. Digitalization is not important to them when compared to the basic needs of food, shelter and clothing which they hardly fulfill to the maximum. It is therefore logical that a huge proportion of the population is not able to access internet services due to increasing levels of poverty. A closely associated factor with this phenomenon is the variance of minimum wages in different countries. Many third world countries have people working below the internationally stipulated minimum wages. Workers in these countries are exploited, working for long hours for little pay. The process can have dire consequences to the growth of the gap in utility of the internet connections such that people are always busy working with little time and money to explore and discover new methods or the importance of internet connections. There are wide disparities amongst income groups. The better off are far more likely to have PCs and Internet connections than others.

Education

A society that needs information for its growth and development realizes that education is an important aspect when it comes to basic culture and technical preparation. Internet and the ability to know and understand computer applications has become a necessary advantage for many job seekers internationally. Every individual or child has the right to education. The internet is the domain of the literate. A person who cannot both read and write cannot have any reasonable expectation of making practical use of either a computer or the Internet with any facility**.** Information and technology has helped to increase literacy rates all over the world. Internet has become an important aspect of the learning process especially in tertiary learning institutions such as colleges, technical institutes and

universities. ICT has become a major subject taught in most schools but many adults did not have the opportunity to learn how to use computers when they were in school. The gap in the utilization of internet and other electronic sources has been greatly influenced by the quality of education a person has or inspires to achieve. For example, students in colleges tend to use the surf engines more than high school students. Furthermore, as an individual is able to acquire more knowledge and education, digital communication becomes a necessity. However, for third world countries the problem of internet and education is determined by greater forces. The fact these nations are poor means that many public institutions cannot afford internet connections as a tool for learning. Most luxuries are left for the rich who are able to afford the best quality education that money can buy. The inclusion of the internet in most learning programs requires a personal initiative from an individual rather than the society at large.

Gender

Access and use of ICTs are known to have the potential to influence social and economic well being. However, a range of other factors contribute to inequality among those with access to ICT and those marginalized from them. Though the digital divide in many countries is being bridged slowly but surely, the aspects of gender cannot be ignored in terms of its utility. The division between women and men is not only in terms of economics but in dimensions of technology as well. The inability of women to access information and technology in general is attributed to many factors be it political, economical and cultural. The variety of information technologies in the competitive markets does not bridge the gap of accessibility when it comes to gender issues. In many developing countries poor infrastructure is weaker in rural areas when compared to urban areas. Most women live in rural areas where accessibility to information and technology is limited. Hence women become deprived in terms of information and technology. Women in poor countries especially the rural areas do not have access to education and technological skills to utilize ICT's efficiently. This is likely due to the fact that they are constrained by language barriers since women who are deprived educationally lack the opportunities to learn the international languages that are utilized by the internet.

Dependency

Dependency on technology happens when technology is widely used without regarding the consequences of the increased utilization of technology. There is an increase in concern about the rate at which people who can afford advanced technology are consuming it. In the developed world, the dependence on technology has spread in almost all the systems that are important to the survival of the economy and society. For example, in the banking system the use of automated teller machines in banks has reduced the need for human service delivery and movement in the banks also in the health sectors and education system. Dependency on technology hence automatically requires that members of societies become literate in matters of technology in order to survive. Urban people have access to services facilitated by technology and hence they become dependent on it when compared to rural folk.

Technology for third world countries is costly. However due to the increase of technology in the international arena, these countries are forced to put more effort in order to be at parity in the competitive global economy. The digital divide between the North and the South is greatly felt especially when the third world countries continuously depend on finances from the North. These finances come with conditions that are mainly agreeable to the North.

Rural and Urban Perspective

For many rural dwellers in developed countries, the abundance of information and technology is a blessing that creates conveniences in the daily lives of the people. The automation of service deliveries in institutions such as banks eliminates the travelling necessities to the metropolis in order to access finances. Frequent communication to investors and families through video phones and conferences helps to save time and money.

Generally, in developed countries, the internet services are cheaper hence individuals in the rural areas can afford these services despite their geographical location. The major difference between the urban and rural areas in developed countries is the adequacy of internet service and geographical distance. The rate of internet use is higher in urban areas than in rural areas. The geographical coverage determines the capability of how fast or slow one is able to be connected to the internet. However, this is not the case with developing countries, information technology in developing urban areas is still limited due to costs, education and income variations of the city dwellers. The internet services are available but are restricted to certain areas such as high learning institutions and government offices. Rural areas are by conventional wisdom, held to be unattractive for any telephone or internet service provider. The capital cost involved is high and the revenues are poor. The poor power supply on which internet services are predicated especially in the rural areas makes the use of the internet less cost effective. Thus, the rural areas in developing countries lack internet facilities due to poor infrastructure, education and poverty. In a nut shell, the utility of internet services globally vary between rural and urban dwellers. Upon further analysis, the digital divide in rural developing areas is greater than in rural developed areas. Consequently, the urban dwellers in developed cities use more internet services when compared to urban dwellers in developing countries.

Cultural Dimensions

There are certain cultures that hinder the possibilities of progress especially when it comes to evolution of information, technology and communication. There are people, or cultures, that, as a matter of fact, can use new information and communication tools, such as the internet, but choose not to do so. The growth in information technology holds the promise in the growth of sustainable economic growth that is beneficial to everyone on the planet. However, cultural and behavioral attitudes create barriers that inhibit technological process, adaptation and utility by many in the world. Thus, even though, the country might try to promote the utilization of ICT’s in the country, behavioral attitudes of individuals might contribute to digital divide.

Behavioral and attitudinal barriers are mainly enhanced by myths and stereotypes about the internet. Studies have shown even in developed countries, people have resisted adaptation of advance technology based on misconceptions such as: computers are for clever people, for men, and for younger people. A huge number of the older generation believed that they are unsafe and they lack security for personal information. This is a pattern most common in rural areas. Most families also believed that internet caused increase in immorality due to the variety of content that was accessible.

Age

The digital divide is also influenced by age. There is an existence of digital divide between the young and old which is also closely linked to accessibility. Children and teenagers use computers and the internet more than any other age group and that computers at schools substantially narrow the gap in computer usage rates for children from high and low income families. It seems that young people feel more comfortable with new technology and are able to benefit from it more than older people. Older people are less likely to have a computer and are less likely to be interested in using the Internet In order to benefit from the digital technology people must know how to use it.

Economic Development and Distribution

The unequal access to information technology and communication increase the developmental gap between rich developed countries and poor developing countries. Economic power is vital to the accessibility. Many developing countries have become trapped in technologies that are obsolete. Therefore, it can take any economic sector a very long period of time to evolve and overcome the impact of intense investments in analogue communication system and landlines. Thus, the rise of digital divide and its utility lies in ability of the communications sector to survive such unavoided circumstances. The digital divide in developing countries is closely tied to the contextual economic environment of the respective countries. Countries with thriving economies are largely associated with increased access to ICTs compared to those whose economies are doing badly. In addition, the economic development is increasingly being tied to the breadth and depth of digital gaps within and between nations. Countries with low digital gaps are more developed (developed world) than countries with high digital gaps (developing countries).

Conclusion

Digital Divide is defined as the growing gap between those who have access to and the skills to use ICT and those who, due to economic or/and geographical reasons, have limited or no access. The digital divide can be identified at both the domestic level and at the international level. The gap varies with the utilization of technology from one country to the next depending on variables like education, gender, governance, age, economy and distribution. There is significant divide in the utility of the internet which varies from rural to urban centers all over the world. Many developed countries attribute the widening gap of lack of utilization of computers and the internet to stereotypes, myths and misconceptions about ICT's. Through the practical use of the leap frog theory, some

developing countries have been able to afford and access technology and communication systems and therefore bridging the gap of digital divide as well as promoted its use. Political instability and corruption in main institutions have led to a decrease in development consequently leading to stagnation of the growth in ICT's in a country. The utilization of internet services vary with the level of interconnectedness an individual has. Furthermore, many people in the world live below the minimum wage and find internet costly and unaffordable.