

The Existential Significance of the Digital Divide for America's Historically Underserved Populations

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ABSTRACT

During the 1990's, the digital divide figured prominently in the discourses of academics, corporate leaders, educators and policymakers worldwide. In the US, we witnessed a massive infusion of computers and Internet access into homes, schools, libraries and other neighborhood institutions. This has significantly increased citizens' physical access to information and communication technology (ICT) artifacts and enhanced citizens' opportunities for acquiring and strengthening technical skills. However, does increased physical access and technical skills signal closure of the digital divide? In this paper, I address this question by describing the preconstructed ways in which the digital divide is conceptualized by academics and policymakers, and inferring what these conceptualizations suggest about the existential significance of the digital divide as experienced by historically underserved groups in the U.S.

KEYWORDS: user attitudes, novice users, ethnography, urban IS, community IS

INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies (ICT) such as the World Wide Web, email, and computers have become an integral part of America's entertainment, information, and communication culture. Corporations and government agencies are increasingly offering products, services, and information online. Educational institutions are integrating ICT in their curriculum and are offering courses from a distance. Indeed, over the past decade, ICT has become indispensable for many middle- and upper-class American households (Hoffman, Novak and Venkatesh, 2004). However, government analysts warn that historically underserved populations such as low income households, racial and ethnic minorities, and older and disabled Americans may continue to be distinctly disadvantaged if this divide is not closed because American economic and social life is increasingly becoming networked through the Internet (US Department of Commerce, 1995).

The 'digital divide' is the term used to describe disparities in ICT access. These gaps in access are generally formed along the longstanding and systemic fault

lines of race, gender, age, income, physical and mental ability, and spatial location. Since the National Telecommunications and Information Administration released its first digital divide report in 1995, access to ICT has increased for most American citizens, but does this mean that the digital divide has been bridged? Is further research in this area warranted or has the digital divide become passé?

The answer to questions such as these is largely determined by the manner in which the digital divide is conceptualized by academics and policymakers. If we conceptualize the digital divide as a gap in access and skills, then the common technology-centric solutions of increasing public access facilities and training are perhaps sufficient. However, common technology-centric solutions seem limited as we shift the discussion of the digital divide from gaps to be overcome by providing equipment and skills to social development challenges to be addressed through the effective integration of technology into communities, institutions, and societies. Effective integration of ICT requires consideration of the ability of historically underserved groups to access, adapt, and create knowledge using ICT (Warschauer, 2002).

In this chapter, I delve closer into the question of the existential significance of the digital divide as experienced by historically underserved groups in the U.S. Existentialists embrace the human emotional experience of life, and believe that experiences significantly influence human decision making. From an existential perspective, while broader physical access to computing artifacts is important and necessary for bridging the digital divide, the decision to adopt and use ICT is largely a matter of the meanings, values, and experiences of the individual. In what follows, I begin by first reviewing major issues and controversies in digital divide research, and conclude with recommendations.

BACKGROUND

The digital divide is an ambiguous term, and this contributes to the difficulty in developing effective policy responses. McSorley (2003) argues that the concept of the digital divide has gained some ascendancy precisely because of its central ambiguity, that it can mean all things to all people at once and hence mobilize a diverse community of interests. Without conceptual clarity it is difficult to develop effective policy interventions because there is no solid understanding of the problem at hand, how it can be measured, how it can be tackled, or how it can be prevented.

Contemporary interest in the digital divide is largely due to coverage in government and foundation reports, newspapers, broadcast news, and popular magazines. Our understanding of the digital divide is largely based on survey data. For instance, U.S. households have experienced a rapid gain in computer and Internet access with two million new Internet users per month. In September

2001, 143 million Americans (54%) were using the Internet, and 174 million Americans (66%) used computers (U.S. Department of Commerce 2002). The gains are largest for low-income families (those earning less than \$15,000 per year increased at a 25% percent annual growth rate versus 11% for households earning \$75,000 and above), and under represented ethnic and racial minorities (33% for Blacks, 30% for Hispanics, 20% for Whites and Asian American and Pacific Islanders). American Internet users are also engaged in a wide variety of activities - 45% use e-mail, 36% use the Internet to search for products and services, 39% of individuals are making online purchases, and 35% are searching for health information (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2002). Thus the US is experiencing a persistent but closing gap in computer and Internet access along the lines of ethnicity and race, geographic location, household composition, age, education, and income level (Hoffman and Novak, 1998; Lenhart, et al., 2003; Lenhart, et al., 2000; Norris, 2001; U.S. Department of Commerce, 2002;. Mossberger, Tolbert and Stansbury, 2003).

Similarly, national diffusion rates are used for examining global digital divides, particularly the noticeable gaps in ICT infrastructure between the developed and the developing countries of the world. In the latter, many aspects of the technology may even be seen to constitute an inevitable luxury – they simply cannot afford to do without them, yet can they afford them financially! According to the 2003 Nielsen Net ratings, 580.78 million (9.57%) people worldwide have Internet access. North America accounts for 29% of the global Internet access, followed by Europe with 23%, Asia-Pacific with 13%, and Latin America with 2% (Nielsen Netratings, 2003). By 2005, 15.2% of the world's population (approximately 973 million people) is estimated to have Internet access (Internet World Stats, 2005). Internet usage in North America declined to 23% of world Internet usage due to relatively faster uptake in Europe (29.3%), Asia-Pacific (34.2%), and Latin America (7.5%). The highest Internet usage growth is taking place in Africa (429.8% usage growth from 2000-2005 as compared to 107.3% in North America, the slowest Internet growth region of the world). Yet Africa only accounts for 2.5 of the world's Internet users. Castells (1988) uses the concept of 'technological apartheid' to refer to this process of disconnecting complete countries and poor neighborhoods from the world's economic and social systems. According to Norris (2001), these disconnections occur not only as a global divide between the developed and undeveloped worlds, but also as a social divide between the information rich and the information poor, and as a democratic divide between those who do and those who do not use the new technologies to further political participation.

Academics and policy think tanks have largely taken up the statistical formulations for both articulating and measuring the digital divide. Consequently, under these conditions, the digital divide comes to scholars *preconstructed* in terms of research questions, methods, measurements, and assumptions. This encourages us to define technology in certain ways, to ask certain questions and

exclude others, to take up problems defined in advance, and, perhaps most tellingly, to accept the terms of public debate as the basis for our research.

The emphasis, to date, has been to describe the digital divide in statistical terms as a means of presenting trends or demographics. These statistics are often used to create and justify categories such as “people on the wrong side of the divide” and “information have-nots”. With positivist thoroughness, we define the have-nots as the typical problem populations (unemployed workers, low income families, racial and ethnic minorities, single-parent families, high school ‘drop outs’, senior citizens, inner-city residents). Statistical rigor provides authority which supports hegemonic discourses that are in sync with the international think tanks like OECD, DOT Force and World Bank (McSorley, 2003).

In digital divide discourses, haves and have nots are ranked both by natural attributes such as race and age, and by structural conditions of poverty and geographic segregation. These online disparities generally parallel those found off-line (Moss, 2002). Hence, the digital divide discourse becomes preconstructed in the use of science (statistical demographics and digital divide surveys). It also becomes racist in the way that it constructs, names, and ascribes values to groups along social and ethnic lines. Then, in the name of equality and social justice, people engage to aid the groups believed to be inferior (Sterne, 2003).

In the 2000 National Telecommunication and Information Association report, for instance, we see comparisons between racial and ethnic groups with language like “White versus Hispanic households”, “minorities are losing ground”, and “the digital divide has turned into a racial ravine”. Here’s the self-fulfilling prophecy - “Because these factors vary along racial and ethnic lines, minorities will continue to face a greater digital divide as we move into the next century. This reality merits a thoughtful response by policymakers consistent with the needs of Americans in the Information Age.” (US Department of Commerce, 1999). If demographic differences become the focus of digital divide policy debates and solutions, why be shocked when those who belong to groups long designated as inferior still are not engaged? Are we maintaining old and dangerous myths in our simplified constructions of ICT and its value? Will we participate in propagating shortsighted and heavily prejudiced recitations of the demographic characteristics of the divide?

On its own, the digital divide does not create racism, classism, colonialism, or sexism: these phenomena predate computing. Rather, these logics treat historically underserved groups primarily as opportunities for or impediments to the dissemination of ICT. Because the *a priori* premise of ICT is often profit, its logic concerning social issues such as the emancipation of women and minorities, or preservation of the environment becomes largely instrumental. In the context of the digital divide, issues of social justice tend to be reduced to matters of bottom line calculus: tolerated when costless, enthusiastically

promoted when profitable, but too-often opposed when change demands substantial diversion of social and economic surplus (Dyer-Witheford, 2000). Unfortunately, much of the contemporary digital divide discourse advocates ICT as a mechanism for alleviating economic inequality, rather than the more comprehensive notion of social inclusion (Couldry, 2003). The digital divide is often framed as what should be (universal access and effective use) rather than what it is (a contemporary basis of inequality experienced by structural minorities such as urban poor or small/under-resourced businesses).

The assumption underlying the framing of the digital divide along the lines of universal access and effective use is that computer and Internet use significantly and directly impacts economic and employment benefits as well as other opportunities for upward mobility (Hongladarom, 2003). Policy solutions, therefore, tend to focus on technology fixes such as delivering basic computer training courses, wiring public schools and libraries, and providing computing resources with Internet access in poorer communities (Norris, 2001). Over time, market forces are believed to drive the proliferation of ICT. Aggressive public policies or investments targeted to address digital divide problems will no longer be necessary (Compaine, 2001). Indeed, as the statistics report growing numbers of American Internet adopters, the use of the term “digital divide” has largely faded from the policy debates in the U.S. (Kvasny and Truex, 2001), and federal government support for digital divide programs has significantly declined. For instance, the Technology Opportunities Program (TOP) did not receive appropriations for fiscal year 2005, and funding for the Community Technology Center program was reduced from \$32 million in 2002 and 2003, to \$10 million in 2004, and to \$5 million in 2005. The proposed budget for fiscal year 2006 eliminates funding to several educational technology programs such as Enhancing Education through Technology, Star Schools, and Community Technology Centers (CTCs).

In response to these budget cuts and fading US government interest in the digital divide, there have been calls by organizations such as the Benton Foundation’s Digital Divide Network, the National Urban League, CTCNet, and the Civil Rights Forum on Communications Policy to renew wider analytic agendas and to extend analysis beyond statistical snapshots of computer access and genres of use. While we know much about the statistical gains in access, we know comparatively little about the actual impacts of increased accessibility for historically under served groups. Computers and Internet access do not directly lead to “digital opportunities” for under represented groups, communities and nations. Rather, there are both beneficial and detrimental, intended and unintended consequences (Kling, 1998). Moreover, both technological and social aspects such as power relations, motivation, autonomy, knowledge, policies, technical skills, and resources determine these consequences. Thus, it is somewhat naïve to assume that technological access and market forces are the sole roadblocks to expanded Internet use.

A more complex framing is one of ICT as a configurable “computing web” of social and technical factors which exist in localized contexts that are important for understanding disparities in the outcomes resulting from computer and Internet use. Without a contextually nuanced understanding of the social and technical nature of the digital divide, we simply perpetuate stereotyped notions about historically underserved groups and developing countries as “being on the wrong side of the divide”, and propagate shortsighted and heavily prejudiced recitations of the demographic characteristics. Digital divide discourses that repeatedly describe underserved groups as “catching up” and “at risk of falling further behind” may in fact help to perpetuate a self-fulfilling prophecy (Hacker and Mason, 2003).

ICT skills and the capacity to use them are not equitably distributed even when access is largely available. For example, as underserved groups adopt ICTs, access barriers, proficiency, skills, and a wider range of technologies and applications must also be studied. In fact, gaps in knowledge, skills and experience come to the fore as access broadens. For instance, Hargittai (2001) introduces the concept of “second level divides” to signify the considerable difference in people’s ability to find various types of content on the Web and time required to complete online tasks. Age is negatively associated with level of Internet skill, experience with the technology is positively related to online skill, and gender does little to explain the variance in people’s ability to find content online. van Dijk and Hacker (2003) observe that the adoption and use of ICT is cumulative and recursive because individuals must migrate to new hardware platforms, learn new software applications, and develop new skills. Access, skill, use and cost are constantly shifting and reemerging as new ICTs are introduced and as existing ICTs are upgraded.

There are also studies which focus closely on single demographic groups to gain more nuanced understandings about the ways in which ICT is conceptualized and used. Some studies, for instance, have intensively examined racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S. Schement and Forbes (2000) found that African Americans are more likely to buy computers for their children’s future while Hispanic Americans buy computers for work or their business. African Americans also tend to have more positive attitudes toward ICT than similarly situated European American respondents did across a range of questions such as the importance of the Internet and computers for keeping up with the times, and for economic opportunity (Hoffman and Novak, 1998). African Americans are also more willing to learn new computer skills in a variety of ways (i.e. formal education, online education, informal education), and are more willing to use public access sites (Mossberger et al., 2003). Even among non-users of the Internet, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and urban residents are among the most likely to say they will use the Internet someday (Lenhart 2003).

Thus the US government’s proposition of a closing digital divide is premised on a limited conceptualization based on access to computers and the Internet

(Warschauer, 2002; Servon, 2002). The digital divide cannot be adequately addressed without some understanding of the broader context of social and economic stratification (Norris, 2001). Jung, et al. (2001) propose an Internet Connectedness Index (ICI), a measure for monitoring long-term inequities in the quality of Internet connections among users, especially in terms of whether Internet connections will enhance the chances of people's upward mobility. This model moves beyond the comparison of computer and Internet access for diverse groups, by incorporating usage constructs such as time spent online, computer dependency, location of access points, scope of activities, and personal effects of ICT on quality of life to provide insights into how the Internet is being incorporated into a world of structural inequalities. This work moves from measures of use and access to measures of connectedness that better capture broader social structures and can help to determine the social benefits of use and access.

EVIL AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

In this section, I put forth the argument that the digital divide poses a highly technical solution to the intrinsically human problem of evil. While the digital divide has receded from public debates, the subject of evil has received significant attention in the post 9/11 US. For West (1999), evil is the unnecessary social misery, unjust suffering, and unmerited pain experienced by human beings. "All civilizations have a problem with evil, but some – like the US – are in sustained denial even as they view themselves as the embodiment of good" (West, 1999, p. 510). If the US government is conceptualizing the digital divide narrowly as an issue of access that can be remedied with the influx of computers and Internet access, then the country's leaders can safely believe that they've remedied the divide and improved life for most citizens. However, if we see the digital divide as a complex evil which exists in many forms (existential, institutional, social, political and economic) then it becomes clear that there is still much more work to be done.

ISSUES, CONTROVERSIES, PROBLEMS

For me, the digital divide is fundamentally about evil – it is a painful discourse softened through statistics, and dehumanized by numbers. And while people in positions of privilege may empathize with those on "the wrong side of the divide", few feel deeply and openly enough to enable them to see beyond the statistics. Instead of understanding the everyday practices of people who have been historically excluded from the eWorld and developing technology services and information sources, the more common response is to convert and educate the backward masses. We produce discourses that discount their values and cultures, and show them why they need to catch up (Tu and Kvasny, 2006). In fact, their vulnerability may elevate their desire to adopt and use ICT (Kvasny and Truex, 2001). The elites want to provide access and essentially define away the digital divide, but the people on intimate terms with evil don't have that luxury.

I conducted an ethnographic study in a low-income, predominantly African American community to examine residents' experiences with ICT as well as the meanings and values they attribute to technology (see Kvasny 2005; forthcoming-a; forthcoming-b; Kvasny and Keil, forthcoming). One particular area of focus was the perceived benefits and actual outcomes of ICT training at a community technology center. I learned that many people experienced ICT as a type of 'double-bind oppression' (Frye, 1983) which occurred when oppressive forces pushed people into situations for which there are few options, all of which are sub-optimal. These informants were faced with double binds – do you continue to work in a menial job or do you throw it all away to go back to school for additional training? Do you remain on welfare or do you work in a low paying job that won't move you out of poverty? Either way they chose, they could not win.

For instance, Sandy was employed as a bookkeeper. She always enjoyed working with computers and was extremely optimistic about the prospects for using her computer training on her job. Early in the training, she came to see how she could apply her database skills in the workplace. Since she didn't have a computer at work, she decided to bring her home PC into the office. She began to load customer information into an Access database, and was soon printing mailing labels and running reports. Sandy was proud of her accomplishments, but her success did not sit well with her boss. He began to derail her efforts by not allowing her to come to computer classes during her lunch hour. Eventually her boss delivered a final edict – either take the PC out of the office or quit the job. Sandy took a leap of faith and quit her job in hopes of finding another that would enable her to work with computers and maintain a livable wage. In the two months after she quit her job, she attended job fairs but was unable to find employment. She surmised that an ICT-related job remained beyond the reach of a middle-aged black woman with no practical computer experience and a computer certificate from a free city-sponsored program.

ICT presented a double bind – will you continue to believe in the espoused benefits of ICT or will you be betrayed by hoping too much? Sandy noted that “computers are everybody's dream of what is right with the world”, but she did not receive the outcomes and benefits she anticipated. In many ways, these informants are living lives shaped by forces which are not accidentally but systematically interlocked in such a way as to catch them in double binds which penalize motion in any direction. Barriers like single parenthood, low educational attainment, public assistance, and underemployment can't be looked upon individually or additively. These barriers are interwoven. To feel the effects, we have to look at the full range of oppressions.

Frye uses the metaphor of a bird cage that is comprised of several individual wires. Each individual wire is thin and if you only concentrate on one, you would just assume the bird could simply fly around the barrier and be free. However, if you look at all of the wires, it becomes apparent that the sum of the wires

effectively constructs a system of barriers that are as effective as a solid wall in confining the bird. ICT becomes another wire on the bird cage. Digital divide interventions that only deliver ICT access and basic computer literacy are less successful than expected because they fail to redress the systematic barriers that limit ICT access and skills in the first place. The discourse of technology progress is evil because it creates a belief system that is imposed upon people who then are provided little chance of actually benefiting materially from ICT use. Valdez (2000) contends that it does not matter how well people accepted the professed ideology of greater employment opportunities for people with computer skills, because this ideology does not provide solutions for overcoming the structural constraints of race and class bias. Thus, despite our best intentions, we create a double-bind by imploring the historically underserved people to engage with ICT but not delivering on the espoused outcomes.

When I began to question the practical meaning of the ICT access and training provided by the community technology center, I began to see that the training was largely outside of the informant's lived experience. For instance, one word processing exercise had informants creating flyers for a ski resort. The document has a picture of a blond woman with ski gear speeding down a slope with the caption "Feel the Thrill, Ski the Slopes". Another exercise called for informants to create a PowerPoint presentation about strategies for studying in college. These lessons weren't integrated with working-class experiences of informants with little or no experience with skiing or college. The detachment of this type of training from the concrete realities of the informants suggests that their needs remained underserved.

Residents came to the community technology center because they generally believed that ICT access and training would help them to overcome their material deprivation. For them, learning about ICT was rarely just for the sake of learning or creating content. Instead learning was purposefully aimed at improving economic status and social inclusion. Contrary to the statistics that report relatively less ICT use by older Americans, seniors were the most active and innovative ICT. Although most seniors initially came to the center with no immediate purpose other than combating loneliness, over time they began to realize that ICT also offered more tangible opportunities. Pearl's narrative suggests tangible benefits such as opportunities for employment and learning, and taking "a new lease on life".

I want to make sure that you understand how important this [community technology center] is to us. It is giving us a new lease on life. It increases my thoughts, and my ability to learn. The environment is very encouraging. I now have faith and hope. Now I understand that there are things out there for us, as we get old. The [community technology center] fills a great need. We seniors are now becoming qualified homebodies. We can fill these jobs.

For Pearl, ICT was not only a vehicle for economic empowerment. ICT was also constructed as a cultural space from which seniors can resist and transform prevailing societal views in which older Americans are seen as idle and unproductive. Martin and Nakayama (1997) describe cultural space as both a physical location that has culturally constructed meanings, and a metaphorical place from which we communicate. Employing the latter conceptualization of cultural space, ICT becomes a site for social change. She doesn't want to merely survive, to fit in, or to cope. She wants to change society's perceptions about older Americans. She sees herself and her peers as "qualified homebodies" who can compete with younger people in the job market. In this narrative of self-determination, she also notes that "there are things out there for us as we get old." On an existential level, she talks about "faith," "hope," and "a new lease on life."

Ron's also speaks metaphorically from this cultural space as he juxtaposes darkness and light. He talks about being out of the communication loop and feeling "so left behind" due to his lack of ICT skills. For him, ICT is about "feeling connected" and "being part of what's going on".

Technology is the thing of the future. My nieces and nephews tell me that I need to step it up some, so this is my first move to get out of the dark and into the light...I want to be more a part of what's going on. I want to feel connected...I was in the dark. Before I learned about the computers, it was hard to communicate with people...I felt so left behind, out of it. I was not in the loop for communication. I had no email, so I couldn't keep in touch with my family on a regular basis. I had to use the phone. Now with email, I can communicate on a regular basis because it is less expensive.

Another senior, Ms. Ginny, stated that she came to the centers for companionship and social stimulation. She is keenly aware of the risks associated with aging, and displays an inner resolve to stay well mentally and physically. She viewed the community technology center as a place for socializing and community building.

I come to the center to socialize. I live alone, so my time at the center lets me mingle with others. I need to constantly stimulate my mind or I might go crazy. I do not want to get old and alone with no one to talk to like some of my friends. I am afraid of getting ill mentally. There are women in my building that don't get out much and they just deteriorate in body and mind. Plus, the program is free. This is what really makes me come because I am on a fixed income. Black people do not take advantage of programs like whites do. That's part of the reason why we are being left behind.

Ms. Ginny appreciates the social aspects of the program, but these are generally framed in physical rather than virtual contexts. She does not articulate the Internet as a communication medium for overcoming loneliness and isolation that she and other seniors experience. Instead, she highlights the importance of the physical coming together at the technology center. She also speaks from a racial standpoint in which she sees Blacks as falling behind because they don't take advantage of educational programs as rapidly as other racial and ethnic groups.

Ms. Ginny's comments about the program being free are also informative, because even a theoretically free good (the community technology center offers courses at no economic cost to participants) has associated costs. To get access to this free service, residents must overcome situational barriers such as childcare, financial resources, and transportation. Residents must also overcome institutional barriers such as rules and regulations that imposed limits on the duration of use, and the type of content that can be accessed. These situational and institutional barriers are essentially the costs that one must pay for using the centers, and these costs are not evenly distributed. In particular, younger adults with children and participants with jobs tend to face higher costs because their daily lives are complicated by time constraints imposed by parenting and employment responsibilities.

Once I recognized that time was perhaps the largest barrier, I looked for opportunities to introduce participants to online services that might help them to save time. I quickly learned that using ICT for something as mundane as shopping for books is more than simply a matter of convenience; it fundamentally challenged cultural practices such as reading and sharing books. Two participants, Ron and Bill, both describe how in their youth they spent time with older men in their communities hanging out in barbershops and pool halls. These older men always had small paperback books in their pockets. They would encourage young boys to read by lending them books and paying them money if they came back to report on what they had read. They used this practice on me during my fieldwork. Once a week, they would often give me books to read, and they would quiz me when I returned the books.

Since these gentlemen liked to read, I decided to show them how to search for books online at Amazon. I noticed however that many of the books that they looked up were ones that they already owned. I began to show them how they could search for books similar to the ones that they owned, read recommendations, and compare prices among bookstores to get the best deals. Neither man was interested in making purchases online. They told me that there is nothing like going to the local store, chatting with the regulars, and browsing in person. They also felt that information on the Internet was somehow censored - "They won't have everything there, only what they want you to buy".

Indeed, greater ICT access and training was perceived as creating new risks like censorship and cultural domination. Mr. Hudson provides a narrative that seems

to depict an ethos of despair as he constructs ICT as a nightmare for black fathers with low incomes.

What do I think about the Internet? It is a kind of mind destruction. It is kind of like Christmas where the media comes into your house and just takes over. The white man is invading my home through radio and TV ads. He is programming my family to want this stuff. The black man cannot afford to give his family all of this stuff. Therefore, technology becomes a nightmare for us.

Mr. Hudson internalized the limits set by history and his current economic condition, and decided that ICT would not improve the life chances of black men. He saw the same closed doors, dead-ends, and limited prospects. When faced with these betrayals, he adopted a bleak and hopeless worldview that shaped his appropriation of ICT.

In summary, people in working-class communities largely remain faceless and nameless "have nots" to the wealthy and the middle-class people who can safely imagine that the rest of the world is like them. While some informants embraced these preconstructed ideologies about ICT and economic advancement, others articulated oppositional standpoints informed by their own class, gender and racial identities and experiences. In both cases, the existential problems of evil helped to shape informants' motivations, expectations and actual usage of ICT.

SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

West (1999) argues that the US doesn't deal well with evil. Evils like the digital divide surface during hot times but are quickly pushed to the edges during cold moments. Moreover, the voices of those directly experiencing the ill effects of the digital divide are often absent from the discussion. How can a nation engage in serious discussion of suffering when it can solve its problems simply by declaring that an evil like the digital divide has been solved with the installation of computers and a basic computer literacy courses?

According to West, the metaphor for the US is the "hotel civilization" – a nation which doesn't encourage wrestling with evil, misery or pain. Instead the US is more concerned with efficiency, comfort, and convenience. Mobility is the American way because it enables us to turn our backs, check out and walk away from difficult problems. In the same way that we can lose weight and reverse erectile dysfunction with a pill, relieve debt with a phone call, enlarge breasts and remove wrinkles with cosmetic surgical procedures, we seek to find simple solutions to the digital divide. In the hotel civilization, people are busy and don't have the time for investment in the self. Instead, they resort to "purveyors of need" (Bourdieu, 1984) – dietitians, nutritionists, fitness trainers, beauty consultants, financial planners.

Americans also tend to ignore history and look towards the future because it signals progress. Technology is generally prominent in our futuristic visions of society. Thus, we criticize, question, organize, mobilize and convince people on both sides of the divide that ICT is worthwhile. Everyone is to be part of this progressive ICT culture. ICT provides a clean and low-cost solution to inherently social problems. It makes problem people less human in the sense that ICT mediates our interactions with government, health, education and other important institutional spheres which determine our life chances. We become an individualistic and highly efficient civilization driven by a market mentality and an endless search for happy endings.

As a scholar deeply engaged in matters of ICT and social justice, I refute this instrumental depiction of the digital divide. What members of this catch-all category of have nots share is that fact that they are perceived as living outside of the “American dream” of individual success. The digital divide creates new technological barriers between insiders and outsiders. These barriers need to be dismantled through programs which address both the instrumental and social aspects of the divide. As a metaphor for America, the hotel is the fusion of the home and the market. The warmth and security of the home must exist alongside of the calculated efficiency and competitiveness of the market.

The stakes surrounding the digital divide and the science that justifies digital divide policy remedies are large and far-reaching. To date, much of the debate has been technology centric, viewing the divide as one of access to computers and the Internet. However, digital divides cannot be discussed, much less decided, solely on the terrain of technology. The limitations of this technology-centric view have been engaged in the information systems literature since the 1970s. The relevant findings from this literature are often set in specific (large, for-profit) organizational contexts and this masks the more general contributions of the information systems scholarship. For example, information systems scholarship points out the importance of clear and coherent strategic initiatives, the importance of leadership, attention to developing systems with users’ needs and input, the careful control and management of projects, attention to the systemic nature of interdependent systems, the potential value of merging commonplace and emerging technologies, and the need to carefully oversee the entire lifecycle of an information systems effort. Simply, information systems research has much to offer those engaged in the scholarship of the digital divide (Kvasny, Sawyer, and Puro, 2004).

Scholars must also ponder critical questions such as, how am I implicated with the institutional mechanisms that promote unjustified suffering of oppressed people not just here in the US but around the world? This question has to do with our fundamental understanding of the digital divide as an existential problem in which everyday people's efforts to live a better life are being impeded and obstructed by ICT. What if continued subjugation is a precondition for the healthy conditioning and flourishing of American democracy? What if just enough ICT

training is being provided to grease the economic machine and to produce a permanent underclass in America? These are the critical questions asked by the historically underserved groups who serve as collaborators in my research. If we view the digital divide through the eyes of the underserved, we can begin to comprehend the existential significance of this problem.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have provided competing perspectives for framing the digital divide, and the existential significance of the digital divide for historically underserved people. On the one hand, the digital divide is framed as a problem of access that can be solved by markets. The digital divide, from this perspective, is about market values such as price, deregulation and competition. On the other hand, the digital divide can be framed as fundamentally a social problem that stems largely from longstanding inequities in income, education, workforce participation, healthcare, housing and other life chances. The digital divide, from this perspective, is about non-market values such as justice, social welfare and freedom. In the US, it is becoming extremely difficult for non-market values to gain a foothold. West (1999) argues that ultimately there can be no democratic tradition without non-market values. Democracy is about the relationship of public interest and common good to the most vulnerable among us as human beings. Democracy is about curtailing the exercise of arbitrary power. In this chapter, I have argued for a more democratic framing of the intractable problem which has come to be known as the digital divide. Tragically, non-market values are relatively scarce, which is one of the reasons why it is so tough to mobilize and organize people around this important cause. It is hard to convince people that there are alternative options for which they ought to sacrifice if we are truly concerned about meaningful ways to use ICT to eradicate evil and further the social inclusion of historically underserved groups.

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