THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

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THE HISTORY OF THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

The digital divide came into existence once computing technology and the internet came into existence. According to Baase (2013), "Once upon a time, everyone in the world had equal access to personal computers and the Internet. They did not exist, and we all had none" (p. 329).

According to Bates (2013), the divide exists due to "economic barriers, political barriers, and cultural barriers," and the most noticeable gap is the gap caused by economic inequity. As cited by Baase (2013), "in 2011 only 46% of low-income households with children ... had broadband at home, compared to 66% of households nationally" (p. 331).

The digital divide is a loosely defined term with no governing body, and its use and definition differs from country to country and between institutions. According to Jaeger et al. (2012), "It is a challenge to solve a problem you cannot define, and the inconsistency of definitions has affected policy-making processes that attempt to address these issues." (p. 4)

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THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

According to a recent article from the BBC, “UN warning on growing digital ‘chasm’” (September 15, 2017) the UN’s Global Broadband Report states that 52% of the world’s population has no access to the internet, with significant social and economic implications. The UN study noted that information and communication technology have the power to help developing nations promote social goals, such increasing access to health care and health information, or moving towards sustainable agriculture. The global digital divide exacerbates the gap between poor and rich countries, and is a significant problem for developing nations.

Gonzales (2016) asserts that the US, in contrast to developing countries where people may have no access to digital technology, most people have access in some capacity. However, low-income US residents struggle to maintain access, for example due to “temporarily disconnected service, broken hardware, and logistic limitations on public access.” This fuels an ongoing digital divide where those of higher income have reliable access to high quality hardware and internet service, while those of low-income households do not, aggravating socio-economic disparities.
THE CONTROVERSY

When new technology first comes out, it is typically available only to those who can pay a high price. After some time, the new technology gets replaced with even newer technology and becomes less expensive! So, some may argue that instead of “haves” and “have-nots” there are “haves” and “have-laters” (Baase, 2013, p. 330). This is especially true in countries that already have a widespread foundation of technology and internet infrastructure, such as the US.

One surprising critic of the digital divide on a global level is Bill Gates. Per Bates (2013), Bill Gates downplayed the digital divide when he said, “Do people have a clear view of what it means to live on $1 a day? There are things those people need at that level other than technology…”

In regard to libraries addressing the digital divide, one study noted that “While governments at all levels are relying on public libraries to ensure digital inclusion, the same governments are reducing the funding of the very libraries that are being relied on. This places public libraries in an untenable situation with fewer resources by which to meet these demands and expectations.” (Jaeger, Bertot, Thompson, Katz, & DeCoster., 2012, p. 14)

THE ROLE OF THE LIBRARY IN DEFEATING THE DIVIDE

In the US, “No other cultural institutions are prepared to serve the public in the digital-literacy and digital-inclusion capacities the way public libraries do, because of a lack of sufficient public-access technology and a lack of the ability to provide education and training related to the Internet.” (Jaeger et al., 2012, p. 15) In many communities libraries are the primary access point to free digital technology. In addition, even people who have access to computers often choose to use the library’s computers or wifi, likely because of the presence of librarians who can help assist with information-literacy skills. (p. 13) Libraries not only give free access to computers, the Internet, and other digital technology, they also provide digital information-literacy skills through workshops and training, making libraries critical for addressing the digital divide that exists in US communities.

THE FUTURE

In the United States, the creation of new technology fuels the digital divide. New technology always has a high price tag. Reliable access to quality, basic technology and the internet are necessary for addressing the digital divide and the socio-economic disparities that are compounded by it. We can close the gap in the most basic sense by allowing access to the internet in our public libraries. That ensures that children and adults have somewhere to do a range of things that require the internet and technology, from homework and research, to job applications and computer skills training. The global digital divide will be harder to tackle. Bill Gates had a point, people who live off $1 per day have larger concerns than being able to access a computer or the internet. However, the internet can help people become educated about many different subjects and fuel business enterprise, in the process helping to address many social, health, and economic concerns. Overcoming the global digital divide in many countries will require the development of internet and technology infrastructure. The global divide should lessen as time passes and the internet becomes more affordable, but will likely require the targeted efforts of countries, communities, and individuals.

QUESTIONS

1. As a future librarian, what is one way you plan to help lessen the digital divide in your community?
2. How do you think we can help bridge the global digital divide?
References


