

Are the commercial  
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Digital Media and Society Blog The Digital Divide and Commercial Promises made about Digital Media Abdullah, November 30, 2009 There have always been various kinds of social, economic and other divides in all societies due to differences in what we are and what we have, so the 'digital divide' is not surprising. The technological tools that deal with digital media vary considerably in cost and sophistication; hence not everyone has the same set of tools or even access to them or the same level of skills to use them. However, what is surprising is that digital media has not only created a new digital divide in our society, or rather our 'global village', but that it is widening the digital divide instead (NTIA). The global village feeling is not shared by everyone, and despite the convergence of digital media and falling costs, the divide remains. The question this blog considers is whether the commercial promises made about digital media are therefore just hype to cloud our vision about the digital divide.

The reality is that while someone can have the latest technologies and access to the far corners of the world, the person living next door may still have no such concept of this form of 'global community' as envisaged by Daniel Boorstin (1978) in 'The Republic of Technology'. The two will have very different concepts and experiences of community life and its boundaries, and this is what also characterises the digital divide. For example, the first person may conduct business in the comfort of his or her own home, internationally and without even seeing the customers in person, whereas the neighbour would have to physically travel to do the same although the customers may be met in person. This could equally be applied to personal, social, cultural, political, and other engagements but they still

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illustrate two very different sets of experiences for each neighbour. Between geographically apart societies, the digital divide would be even greater. Let alone new digital media, according to the UN, over half of the world still lives “ more than two hours away from a telephone” (Flew, 2008). Thus, some people are in the slow and fast lanes of the information superhighway, but many are nowhere near any needed telecommunications infrastructure.

Technological development has also always been taking place although the rapid pace and convergence phenomena are recent. They are all designed to make certain tasks easier for us and most do benefit us leading to the progress of society. But the extent to which the digital media revolution has penetrated into everyone’s homes and lives (or not) sustains the digital divide and defines a new form of affluence based on information.

Furthermore, as Rodes Fishburn put it, the convergence may also later turn out to be just another ‘ violent schism’. Many of Francis Cairncross’ descriptions of life with the new technologies and predictions are correct but they just don’t describe the same life for everyone. For example, he wrote in The Economist about improved connections, the distance no longer affecting the cost of communicating electronically, about how global location will relate to the kinds of activities people will do, the increasing customisability of networks, the inversion of home and office, etc. These are all taking place but not at the pace and scope envisaged.

One of the interesting developments of the digital media revolution has been the virtual reality worlds created, and there are many of them. These immerse the participant into a wholly artificially constructed community.

Great promises have been made about virtual worlds and they are still

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popular but perhaps not as much as expected. They were even claimed “ as the next major thing to shake up online business” (Vance, 2008) but this judgement was premature. Google for example, also created a virtual world but with hindsight has termed it “ user frivolity” (Vance, 2008) and has now abandoned the project. This again demonstrates that although the commercial promises made about digital media were not completely unfounded, the hype surrounding them has certainly clouded our vision and failed to live up to expectations. Developments arising from digital media are taking place but just not in the way they have been hyped up to be.

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