

The problem and proposed solutions



The Digital Divide debate encompasses issues that are of social, economic and political import. Meaning to say, the issues regarding the digital divide, as a phenomenon and as a current concern that needs to be addressed, is not merely limited to the issue of the existing disparity in terms of access to technology which transverses different sectors of society. This paper attempts to explicate the digital divide, the debate and the foundational issues concerning the phenomenon/problem.

In line with the main task of this paper is the identification of the two most important obstacles that need to be overcome and the two important things that the government needs to create in dealing with the digital divide. In meeting the demands of a global economy, technological advancements especially in the field of telecommunications and information technology are key factors in making possible various transactions faster, cheaper, more reliable and convenient. Needless to say, these technological advances are important tools if companies and other business ventures are to survive in the digital economy.

These technological advancements however, are evolving far too fast which consequently generate pressing problems that ought to be considered. On a preliminary note, the aforementioned rapid technological evolution poses serious questions if our societal structures can rapidly adapt to these changes and more importantly, if we, ourselves can rapidly adapt and be able to integrate for ourselves these changes. A good example is the Internet and the online community and it is to this topic that we shall now turn.

A fuller understanding of the digital divide phenomenon necessitates an understanding of its underpinnings. As Pippa Norris contends, “ the digital

divide is understood as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing three distinct aspects” (Norris). These three distinct aspects according to Norris are the global divide, social divide and democratic divide, respectively. Norris elucidates further, “ The global divide refers to divergence of Internet access between industrialized and developing societies.

The social divide concerns the gap between the information rich and poor in each nation. And lastly, within the online community, the democratic divide signifies the difference between those who do, and do not, use the panoply of digital resources to engage, mobilize and participate in public life” (Norris). One may thus infer that these three aspects related to the issue of ‘ access’ to the Internet involve not mere social, but also economic and political considerations.

In an article entitled, What is the Digital Divide, Harouna Ba makes a similar point as Norris. Ba writes, “ lack of access to networked technology will result in a substantial segment of society having neither the skills nor the means to participate in the progressively more knowledge-based U. S. economy” (Ba). As Ba contends, there is a felt need to address the issue of access along with the social, economic and political considerations that it entails. At this point, the emphasis is on what Norris calls disadvantaged communities.

As mentioned earlier, these communities lack not merely access but also and more importantly, the necessary skills and the means to participate in the digital world. Ba identifies a number of obstacles in dealing with the digital divide phenomenon/problem. But, as I reckon it, in relation to the issue of access, the two most important obstacles in dealing with the digital divide

are the issues of the disadvantaged communities' not having the skills that are necessary and their lack of the means that are necessary.

These two are barriers to technological access. One may thus infer that the issue of access only becomes a legitimate issue because of these two obstacles. Again, it is not merely a matter of providing the communities with a greater access to computers and the Internet by lowering the cost of the hardware and software that hardware and software companies manufacture and sell in the market nor is it merely a matter of increasing the ratio of computers to students in our schools and other institutions of learning.

This will not solve the digital divide. The solution to the problem lies on our capability to the address the needs of the disadvantaged communities. There is a need for intervention, so to speak. The government has a significant role in addressing these needs. However, the government's intervention will not suffice. There is a need for a multi-sectoral cooperation in addressing the needs of disadvantaged communities. A crucial question comes into the scenario. What needs to be done?

As Ba sees it, what is needed is to develop community-based technology programs that will support the needs of disadvantaged communities. Ba writes, " Community technology access models are often grounded on community needs and encompass multiple goalsto strengthen neighborhoods, educate youth, promote economic development, connect individuals to the social and economic life of the community, and increase participation in civil society" (Ba). It is of utmost importance that we first assess the needs of the community so that we may provide the appropriate solutions.

Furthermore, it is important that technology programs be based on the needs of disadvantaged communities so that these communities themselves may have the opportunity to identify and thereby, integrate what the vital functions of technology are to them and the opportunities that it can provide for them. Such an integration entails that a disadvantaged community sees the relevance of technology in their lives. It may thus be inferred that for Ba, the digital divide may be addressed by people empowerment.

Our concerted efforts must be directed to empowering the disadvantaged sectors of society. How can this be done? People empowerment is made possible through community education. As Ba contends, there is a lot of work to be done especially in “ the areas of learning and teaching with and/or about advanced technologies in informal settings for under-served communities” (Ba). This is one of the main reason why government initiatives and interventions in the past only had a limited success in dealing with the digital divide phenomenon.

There indeed are initiatives and interventions but they do not address the problem. They miss the point, so to speak. As Ba notes, state governments attempt to address the digital divide via two government agencies; the Public Utility Commission (PUC) and the Department of Education. The PUC by appealing to telecommunication companies and the likes for universal service and the Department of Education by making provisions for computers in school for those students that do not have access to a computer and the Internet at home.

These attempts miss the point because they have been made on the unfounded assumption that the digital divide issue is merely an issue of ‘

access' and thus, can be solved by making computers and the Internet more accessible to individuals. But what can these initiatives and interventions accomplish if in the first place, the problem is that individuals from disadvantaged sectors of society lack the necessary skills and the means to be able to access and thereby, utilize technology? The plain truth of the matter is that technology evolves much faster than society can adapt to it.

Furthermore, why limit the provisions with the students? Why not youth in general? Why exclude out-of-school youth? This merely shows that the limited success of state initiatives and interventions may be explained by the fact that their assumption is unfounded and that their digital divide programs are not grounded on community needs and thus, ineffective. The digital divide phenomenon/problem is not merely a problem of access. The preceding discussion makes it clear that it is not a mere matter of identifying "the have from the have not".

Even this distinction is grounded on further distinctions in terms of the social, economic and the political. These further distinctions albeit different from each other, are very closely interrelated that they all affect changes in the others. Human society is complex. It is not simply a social system. It is also a political system and every political system is also an economic system. The human mind too is complex. There are countless possibilities in terms of scientific and technological advancements. Science and technology evolves too fast.

In contrast to science and technology, our societal structures and institutions do not. They do not because there are many other significant things to consider. Perhaps, this is the predicament of our time. Works Cited Ba,

Harouna. " What Is Digital Divide". August 20 2007. . Norris, Pippa. Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, InformationPoverty, and the Internet Worldwide (Communication, Society and Politics). Cambridge Cambridge University Press, 2001.