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Technology and Society

American culture has evolved into a society that relies heavily on technology daily. However, not everyone enjoys access to the technology that others do, which causes a "digital divide" between certain groups of people (Mossberger and Tolbert). This can be exacerbated by the proficiencies and potential abilities people have to operate technologies efficiently. Their ability can be called "digital literacy," and it can be just as socially debilitating as the digital divide. Being in certain "groups" – which will be defined in this paper – dictates an individual's personal digital divide and digital literacy.

The digital divide can be very easily broken down into several groups. One of the most prominent factors that can be seen on a daily basis is a person's age. According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (PRC) in 2012, the likelihood of adults between 18 and 29 years old having a cell phone is 95%. Senior citizens, on the other hand, have a likelihood of just 69%. When it comes to ownership of laptops, the divide becomes all the more evident. The younger group has an ownership rate of 75% versus the senior citizens 32% (PRC). This means that younger adults have a much higher possibility of being connected at any moment than those who are over 65 years old. This is evidenced by my grandma, who is 72 years old, when she said that she owned a laptop for work purposes, but most of her friends had no need for one. However, they all had cell phones, which goes against the collected data by the PRC, showing that there are myriad categories that may influence the divide.

For example, economic status also plays into the digital divide because it affects what people can buy. Electronics are all set to essentially the same price, so there is a major difference between those who are well-off financially and those who live paycheck to paycheck, in terms of the types of technology they can afford. Obviously, if a family cannot afford to buy certain luxuries other families can afford, it creates a divide between the two groups. In families with a low (under $30k per year) income, 43% of them owned a laptop. In families earning over $75k per year, there was an 83% ownership rate for laptops in the household (Pew). In talking to a family friend who makes well under $30k per year, she said that she was able to receive a laptop due to a government assistance program. If she had not received that, she says "it would be incredibly hard to keep up my grades [at Clark College], because of all the online assignments and online studying that's required."

The level of college education also plays a large role in what kind of technology a person owns. Of those who obtained at least a Bachelor's Degree in college, 93% of them owned a cell phone. People who did not even graduate high school had a cell phone ownership rate of only 76% (Pew). Of all the people I interviewed, none of them were lacking a cell phone, but my sample group did not include anyone who had not graduated from high school. My father, who has a Master's Degree, said that it would be "possible, but certainly much more work and a whole lot less fun" to go to college and graduate without owning a phone. He says that having a phone in this day and age is what connects everyone together, because it would be difficult to get invites to study groups, parties or any other events without a phone.

Digital literacy is closely related to the digital divide, because it essentially divides people, just in a different way. For example, it is a common stereotype that many elderly people don't have the greatest grasp on technology. This lack of digital literacy would divide them from the group of people who can seemingly do whatever they want with technology. This is because technology keeps advancing, faster than some people care to keep up with, which Rushkoff notes in his tenth chapter regarding “Purpose” (Rushkoff). As more and more gadgets come out or are improved upon, the more there is for people to know and learn about, which can sometimes create an overwhelming feeling of inadequacy and, eventually, make people give up and stop buying the gadgets and understanding how they work. This is evidenced by the fact that senior citizens trail in every single category the Pew measured.

However, looking at the PRC’s data can sometimes be a bit misleading. “Gadget” ownership percentage increases with every "jump" in education (PRC). This does not necessarily mean college graduates are more tech-savvy than a high school dropout, it just means that they have the ability and desire to own more gadgets. A great example of this is illustrated by one of the people I interviewed. My friend, David, considers himself a "hacker," but he only has a high school degree. He is highly competent when it comes to computing, even though he is not well "educated" in other areas. Another friend, Spencer, is working on his Master's Degree, and knows the computer well enough to do all of his assignments and research, but is a far cry from David's understanding of the technological world.

Being in certain groups affects the digital divide and digital literacy of an individual, which can have real-life implications in our changing society. The digital divide can be impacted by many things, such as a person's age, economic status, or education. Digital literacy can be changed if there is a concerted effort to do so, but it is often determined by factors such as age. It is unfortunate many people don’t have access to technology because of their social groups, but recognizing that the divide exists is the first step toward fixing the problem.

Bibliography

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