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DTC 101

April 20, 2013

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The Digital Divide is Real

What is digital divide? Mossberger and Tolbert define digital divide as: “…the patterns of unequal access to information technology based on income, race, ethnicity, gender, age, and geography…” (Mossberger and Tolbert 201). Monroe defines digital divide as “The metaphor of a great chasm – a divide – polarizes the issue as a matter of simply having, or not having, access to the internet” (Monroe 5). The Digital Divide Institute also has a similar definition: “Digital Divide refers to the gap between those who can benefit from digital technology and those who cannot” (Smith). From these definitions I understand that digital divide is basically the barrier between the people who do and don’t have access to the internet. What is digital literacy? The University Library of the University of Illinois defines digital literacy as “The ability to use digital technology, communication tools or networks to locate, evaluate, use and create information” (Illinois). From this, I understand that digital literacy is basically learning to find, evaluate, and then create or ‘develop’ information in a digital format. The digital divide is real, and its impact varies with the need for modern technology.

For my first interview, I interviewed my grandma who is in her 80’s. The term digital divide did not seem significant before she discovered what a computer was. Before our visit to Ukraine, all the access she had to information was the town gossip or the once-a-month newspaper. The only access to technology that she had was a telephone. While were vacationing in Ukraine, I helped her learn how to use a computer. This is where digital divide started playing a vital role. Up until this point, she was on the other side of this ‘barrier’ if you may. As soon as she had access to the internet, things changed quickly. Digital literacy was now possible. An example of her being actively involved in digital literacy is via Skype. Using a simple program to connect to all her relatives to create conversations is exactly what digital literacy is. I refer back to the quote from the University of Illinois where it says “The ability to use digital technology, communication tools or networks to locate, evaluate, use and create information” (Illinois). I believe that digital divide and digital literacy work together. If you do not have access to the internet, then you cannot produce any information using the internet. If you do have access, then you are able to produce and create digital information. However, digital literacy only works if the individual knows how to use the technology. Statistically, access to the internet in that town in Ukraine is very limited. Not many people have the privilege of viewing online content. Saying so, most people are living on the other side of this digital divide. Access to the internet is a privilege in that country.

For my next interview, I interviewed my 9 year old sister. As a child that goes to school, access to the internet is vital. There is no way around that. She has always lived in the positive division of the digital divide. There is always access 24 hours a day, and 7 days a week via computers and smartphones. According to an article from The New York Times, journalist Matt Richtel says that a majority of the time spent online is wasted (Richtel). Another article from NBC News claims that only 20% of our time is spent online (Popkin). I tend to agree with Richtel. While my sister has access to the internet for school, she also has access to online games as well. Sometimes she spends so much wasted time on the internet that she has to end up doing her homework at midnight. That is obviously more than 20%. The article had said that “Like other researchers and policy makers, Ms. Boyd said the initial push to close the digital divide did not anticipate how computers would be used for entertainment” (Richtel). My sister is a great example of someone who has the privilege of access to the web and lives on the positive side of the digital divide.

Another interview I conducted was with my dad who is a businessman in his late 30’s. My dad spends a vast amount of time online due to the business in which he operates. Access to the internet is a must because invoices must be made, as well as bills to be paid. To be on the other side of the digital divide would be impossible for a businessman. The business relies on the internet. Another article from The New York Times had this to say: “While a standard telephone line can be an individual’s pathway to the riches of the Information Age,” the report said, “a personal computer and modem are rapidly becoming the keys to the vault” (Crawford). From this, you can see that the internet is a very valuable component. Businesses need the internet to produce and create documents. Digital literacy is seen here because in order to be involved in digital literacy to produce documents online, an individual has to be on the positive side of the digital divide.

For my fourth interview, I spoke to a 20 year old colleague. As a student, being on the accessible side of the digital divide is a must. Constant access for schoolwork and research projects is extremely necessary. Without the access to the internet, there would be no digital literacy. If we remember, digital literacy is “the ability to use digital technology, communication tools or networks to locate, evaluate, use and create information” (Illinois). He said that “I wouldn’t even be able to do my homework without a computer” (Student). Therefore, digital literacy would not be possible for this college kid without being able to access the internet on a daily basis.

In my final interview, I interviewed another elderly woman who is retired and currently lives without access to the internet. Neither does she have access, nor does she want it. As someone who’s grown up without internet, she has no use for it in her old age. This is an example of someone who does not have the need for digital literacy because there is no internet access. According to the Pew Research Center, the likelihood of senior citizens having a cellphone is 69% (Pew). The article from The New York Times infers that millions of people still do not have internet access because of the high costs of internet (Crawford). While many factors can be involved, this is an example of someone who plainly does not want internet. This is an extreme rarity especially in such a modern time. Just in my interviews, this was the only person who does not need internet. Statistics don’t show this group of people.

In conclusion, the digital divide is real. We encounter various individuals who live on different sides of the technological barrier. Some must live on the positive side of this barrier in order to be a part of digital literacy, while others just simply prefer to stay connected with the modern age. There are even others like I encountered who prefer to be disconnected from modern technology, and want to live on the negative side of the digital divide. While people may deny the existence of the digital divide, I have proof from testimonials of people that it does indeed exist and is very much alive.

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