Starling Preston

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How Access and Digital Literacy Effects the Digital Divide

The digital divide, as described by Mossberger and Tolbert, “describes patterns of unequal access to information technology based on income, race, ethnicity, gender, age, and geography that surfaced during the mid-1990’s” (1). Infrequent access and varying levels of digital literacy is only serving to widen the gap of the digital divide, creating navigation and research issues for multiple generations.

According to statistics, only 44% of adults who were fifty to fifty-nine years old had access to the Internet (Lenhart 5). While this number is less than half of that generational group, a September 2009 survey stated, “half of all social networking users ages 50 and older said that they had been contacted by someone from their past who found them online” (Madden 6). Therefore, these adults are becoming more digitally literate through their frequent interactions with social media and websites on the Internet. Mel and Tisa Preston are two Caucasian adults both aged over fifty years old, who have home access to the Internet. When asked how they use the computer on a daily routine, Tisa responded, “I use it to play Farmville and to keep up with family and friends” (Preston, T.) Similarly Mel stated that he used his computer to keep up with old high school friends. These two subjects supported the findings that older adults use Internet access for social networking with friends from the past, and family on a typical day.

However, when asked what he uses his computer for, Billy Arn a college student of twenty-two, responded “I’m hardly on the internet, but when I am I mostly use it for doing research for classes and looking up Youtube videos for math” (Arn). When all parties were asked if they felt they were “digitally literate,” the Prestons responded in a positive manner while Arn stated he felt “technologically disadvantaged” due to his infrequent utilization of the Internet, making him digitally incompetent (Arn).

When considering the access divide, Tolbert and Mossberger are mostly interested in whether the individual has access to a computer, its location, its use, and the frequency of its use (9). Their research supports the conclusion that an increased usage of the Internet made its users feel more technologically savvy. While Arn, who hardly uses the computer, felt he was at a technological disadvantage, the Prestons felt sound in the digital literacy and ability to navigate the computer. This is due to the fact that the Prestons are more frequently using their computers than Arn. The access issue, through unequal usage of the Internet, is deepening the gap of the digital divide by making one party more digitally literate than the other.

The digital divide is not only between those who have access to a computer and those who don’t. KJ Dell’ Antonia argues that the new digital divide is between “kids whose parents are saying ‘turn that thing off’ and those whose parents don’t limit their access” (Dell’ Antonia). This is supported by Rushkoff’s first command, time (28). Rushkoff argues that a computer user should not always “be on” (28). Users “strive to multitask, attempting to give partial attention to more than one thing at a time” (Rushkoff 35). Therefore when users are always on, their access is to the Internet is unlimited, hindering their ability to multitask and decipher credible sources of information, making them digitally incompetent.

Talia Carol, a freshman of the Vancouver School District stated, “I’m always on my laptop for school” (Carol). In contrast Lacey Wescom, a fifth grade student, gave the impression that she was hardly on her father’s laptop. While Talia’s parents do not limit her computer access time, Lacey’s time on the laptop is limited to two hours after school. Less access to the Internet creates the ability to be less distracted by biased and unreliable articles and websites, such as Wikipedia, when conducting research. The ability to focus on credible sources and decipher biased articles enhances digital literacy and the ability to navigate the Internet.

While Talia felt that she was digitally literate, she felt that she was unable to “do proper research” (Carol). In contrast Lacey felt that she could do proper research on the Internet. This is due to the fact that choice, Rushkoff’s other command, is biased towards available choices and user preferences: “the more we learn to conform to the available choices, the more predictable and machine like we become” (59). In Talia’s case, while she felt she was digitally literate, she wanted instant gratification from the choices her computer searches were offering her. Wikipedia is one of the most used databases for information; it’s popular and easily available. However, since volunteers conjunctively create its information, it can be prone to biases. Since Wikipedia is a popular choice by users its information is often sited, despite its credibility. She also felt distracted by popular social media sites, such as Facebook. The Associate Direction for Research at the Pew Internet Project Kristen Purcell noted that while search engines give instant access to information, “teachers also feel many students lack the most important skills they need to navigate this new information environment” (Purcell). On the other hand, Lacey, whose computer access is limited, is able to properly search different categories. This could be due to the fact that the multiple facets the Internet offers, such as popular bias articles and social network websites do not distract Lacey. While there is a digital divide between the two girls, the ability to research is actually hindered by the increased time on the Internet, and the choices that it forces users to make.

The digital divide separates those who can effectively navigate information technology and those who cannot. While, this divide may seem insignificant, it is obvious that its effects are creating problems for those with varying levels of digital literacy. While some people felt digitally literate because of frequent access to the Internet, others felt hindered in their ability to navigate the Internet despite their frequent usage. The inability to properly operate information technology will create tribulations for those who need to be able to conduct proper research and navigate multiple sources and social networks.

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Interview Questions:

1. Do you have home access to a computer, and how often are you on it? If not, how do you access the Internet?

2. Do you use any other digital devices to access the Internet, if so what is it?

3. What do you mostly use your computer, tablet, phone, or other digital device for?

4. Do you feel that access to a computer, laptop, or other digital technologies have hindered or helped you in your daily life, if so how?

5. How do you feel about the progression of technology, both in the past and in the future?

6. Do you enjoy being socially connected online, or do you feel that it is a necessary evil?

7. Do you feel that those without computers are at a technological disadvantage, if so how?

8. If you could live life without technology, would you? Why?

9. Do you feel connected with others outside of technology?

10. Do you feel you are digitally literate and can navigate technology well?

11. Do you feel you can do proper research on the Internet and by using print sources (for those in school?

Mel Preston

Age: 68

Occupation: CEO of Dawgfather Co.

1. Yes I have a computer at my house. I’m on it all the time. I like to watch my movies on Netflix, so I’m on it all the time (laughs).

2. No I don’t.

3. I use it to keep up my grooming business and to follow friends from Milton Hershey.

4. They help me keep up with my business, so it’s only helped me.

5. Well, I was five when we got out first T.V., so it’s different even watching videos in color, let alone on a computer! Technology is going to progress, whether we like it or not.

6. I enjoy being socially connected. I like talking to everyone.

7. Yes I do. I watch you do all your online classes. How are kids supposed to do their homework with a computer?

8. Yes I would. I did it once before, and I can do it again.

9. Of course I do. Technology doesn’t run my life. I have friends outside of the Internet; this is just my way of keeping in touch.

10. Yes I feel like I can navigate my computer.

Tisa Preston

Age: 50

Occupation: Secretary of Dawgfather Co.

1. Yes. I am on I at least five hours a day, everyday.

2. I use my Kindle Fire to play Farmville and Words with friends.

3. I use my laptop to play Farmville and to keep up with family and friends.

4. They haven’t helped or hindered me. I like using it to play games, but that’s not really helping my life, I just enjoy doing it.

5. I feel that it has progressed and maybe we will see more progression in the future.

6. It’s a necessary evil like you said. I’d rather talk to your sister over the phone, but I’ll take what I can get.

7. Yes. I think that you need it to be able to work your business and to do school work.

8. No I wouldn’t. I like playing my games. It’s relaxing.

9. Yes of course I do. I don’t live in a hole!

10. Yes.

Billy Arn

Occupation: Student at WSU Vancouver

Age:22

1. I’m hardly on the Internet, but when I am I mostly use it for doing research for classes and looking up Youtube videos for math. Oh, and I play D3.

2. No, I don’t have a cell phone or anything that can do that.

3. See above answer

4. It’s helped me do my Calculus homework because the Professor doesn’t teach it very well.

5. I think it would be cool to have super high-tech video games to play on the computer; I love playing and interacting on Diablo 3.

6. Well I like being socially connected online so I can talk with my girlfriend (laughs). I don’t have a cell phone, so Facebook is one of the only ways I can get a hold of you (her).

7. Nah, I don’t really use my computer unless it’s for homework. I think it’s possible to live without them.

8. No, I like playing D3 too much.

9. Yeah, I hardly use my computer for socialization unless it’s with you.

10. (Laughs) I’m technologically disadvantaged. I can hardly figure out Facebook.

11. Yes but I don’t really use the computer for research for school. Math major and all.

Talia Carol

Occupation: Freshmen in High School

Age: 14

1. I’m always on my laptop for school. Dad let’s me always be on it.

2. My phone could access the Internet, but dad doesn’t allow it.

3. I use it for school work, and going on Twitter and Facebook.

4. I don’t know. I like having my computer, so I don’t think it has hindered me.

5. Well I don’t really know about past progression, but I know dad’s phone is huge and bulky. Mine is the smart phone, so I know it’s different.

6. I LOVE going to Facebook, it’s like a competition to get lots of friends.

7. I think people enjoy being online. So I think that people without computers are missing out on being connected.

8. No because I like being able to use it for school and talking with my friends. Like I have a foreign exchange student friend who I can only talk to over Facebook.

9. Yeah, I go to school and hang out at the mall. I’m not a weird computer freak.

10. Yes I think I’m digitally literate. I know how to use my laptop.

11. No

Lacey Wescom

Occupation: Fifth grade student

Age: 11

 1. Yes I use my dad’s laptop. I don’t use it a lot ‘cause dad doesn’t let me/

2. No,

3. I only use it for school sometimes. I don’t really use it. I like to paint.

4. I don’t really use them’ so not any of that.

5. Um, I think it would be cool to have hover cars and stuff.

6. I don’t have friends online. Dad doesn’t let me.

7. No.

8. I don’t know. I don’t think so because I don’t really use dad’s (computer).

9. Yes because I don’t use dad’s (computer) to have friends.

10. Yes

11. Yes I can do both.