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To “Like,” or Not to “Like;” That is the Digital Divide

            In today’s day and age, there is a standard in the working world that all members of the expanding global community can effectively navigate electronic technologies and networks. This ability to comprehend and utilize technology is called “digital literacy.” Yet, with each new generation the number of paradigm shifts increases, and more of the population is left out of the loop. The "Digital Divide" is widely understood in the computer industry and expertly extorted in the marketing field. However, it is grossly misunderstood by the general public; ironically, the group it most widely affects. As time goes by, suggests Douglas Rushkoff in his lecture at Washington State University (WSU), Vancouver, a circular nature of the “Haves” and “Have-Nots” begins to develop. What the elites of the previous age had, the common people now employ. For instance, when the printing press was invented, not many people used it, "we didn't get an age of authors, we got an age of readers" (Rushkoff). Today, with electronics and the ability to program and create, we have an age of users—people who utilize the commodities, but do not create their own. The “Digital Divide”—at its core—is the new-age division between those who lead and those who follow.

According to Mossberger and Tolbert, access to digital technology yields an immediate advantage in today’s society over communities void of electronic connection. However, “…having access to a computer is insufficient if individuals lack the skills they need to take advantage of technology” (Mossberger 201). Doris, age 84, a widow and retiree, has a computer in her home, but has not turned it on in over a year. She says that she “simply [doesn’t] have the time to learn how it works.” Although she has the ability to actively participate in the online community but chooses not to, Doris falls into the category Monroe describes as the “Don’t-Wants” (14). She demonstrates a lack of digital literacy, which leads to an even greater barrier to overcome before bridging the “Digital Divide.” According to the Pew Research Center, her testimony directly applies to their statistics. “Among adults who do not use the Internet, almost half have told us that the main reason they don’t go online is because they don’t think the Internet is relevant to them” (Digital). Yet, at the same time she also feels a delay in information gathering and a lack in familiar access. Joshua, age 18 and student at WSU, Vancouver, has access and literacy when dealing with mobile and non-mobile technologies. He grew up using the Internet and says that he “could not live without digital technology because it has been such a pivotal part of [his] upbringing that [he] can’t imagine life without it.” This stark difference between Doris and Joshua is precisely what makes the “Digital Divide” so fixed. It proves that access does not necessarily imply digital competence, but digital competence is produced through extended access.

            Furthermore, Rushkoff’s idea of a divide between the elites and the commoners always depended on social and economic status, which Mossberger and Tolbert include in their analysis of the modern “Digital Divide.” However, what Rushkoff drove home in his lecture at WSU, Vancouver about the modern divide between users and creators was that it had very little to do with social status. He implied that the largest barrier between leaders and followers with access and skill is motivation. Even technologically savvy students of the digital age like Alisha, age 22 and substitute teacher in the Battle Ground School District, and Caity, age 19 and student at WSU, Vancouver, use the technology available to them, but have never been interested in learning how that technology works.

Although virtually anyone can learn how to program, as it no longer depends on social status, economic factors must be considered when analyzing a person’s expertise or lack thereof in today’s digital age. Caity says that she only recently upgraded to an iPhone. Previously, she owned a standard, call and text flip phone. She felt restricted socially as her friends communicated over Instagram and Twitter as she had no mobile access to these sites. She felt as though her friends were forming tighter bonds because of their access—because of their economic power to purchase the latest technologies. Until now, she felt out of the loop, thus proving the third point of Mossberger and Tolbert’s claim that economic opportunity largely contributes to the overarching “Digital Divide.”

However, as much as economics may play a crucial role, in terms of race, none of those interviewed felt as though there were any hurtful racial stereotypes in the digital world that felt directly aimed towards them. Most agreed that racial stereotypes exist online and in society—yet they are more prevalent on the Internet. This speaks to the individual's ability to hide behind a faceless name on the Internet and how that anonymity "frees" them from the societal pressures to be politically correct. Jeanette, age 54 and a working mother, says that many of these people are "confusing liberties with rudeness."

Racial stereotypes might not have affected the sample, but as far as gender goes, Caity says that there a slight disadvantage being female because most men in her opinion are more technologically savvy and grasp programs better. Perhaps it is because large portions of young men play online games and derive personal and social satisfaction from those interactions and most females do not. Whatever the reason for Caity, it is rarely a problem for her because she has access to people who are digitally literate and willing to help. It is only a matter of personal pride and dependence.

Yes, there are a great variety of reasons for the “Digital Divide” to exist in today’s society. Be it access, skill, economic means or social pressures, it is clear that the global community as a whole is beginning to shift towards digital technology as a culture and art form. Douglas Rushkoff suggests that the true division now, is not what began the “Digital Divide,” but rather what drives that continued divide. A majority of the new generation of users has access, skill, economic means and social pressures—all the parts needed to participate in the online community. What this new generation needs to utilize most is their personal motivation to not only consume, but also to produce.

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