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The Digital Divide and America

Over the course of the past couple weeks, I interviewed five different people on their thoughts about the digital divide and where we as a culture are heading with technology. The results came from an age range spanning nearly 80 years, from a five-year-old boy living in an upper middle class home with his parents to a retired 84-year-old man who has never owned a computer or even a basic cell phone. In an era of incredible changes in technology that seemingly allow us to connect and contact each other like never before, there are still widespread concerns over the use of technology. All you have to do is ask and people will share their misgivings and fears about where society is heading and how, according to my 84 year old grandfather, “teenagers don’t seem to know how to have meaningful relationships anymore”. These interviews and research have shown that the closer people are to the technology that permeates our culture today, the less aware they are of how technology is changing them.

When asked about their thoughts on the digital divide, and compared online to Pew Internet’s statistics afterwards, the interviewees reflected the statistics quite well. An 84-year-old retired grandfather is part of the 59% of 65+-year-old people who do not use the Internet. He said that he saw no need for the Internet, as many of his friends didn’t use it either and if he wanted to talk to people, he could simply call them. A student in his young 20s attending college full-time is part of the 94% of college students and the 94% of 18-24 year olds who are online (Zickuhr, Smith 2). He is studying as a music major and talked about how the Internet has revolutionized the music industry. While everything used to be sold in physical copies, such as music sheets and even music itself, how everything is online. Music can be bought on iTunes or Amazon, entire libraries of music sheets and tabs are available online, and people can now even create music on their computers without ever picking up an instrument. When asked about the digital divide, he replied that with the massive changes the Internet has brought to society, it’s more of a digital chasm than simply a divide. Nearly every part of our lives, whether important or small details, has been changed by the Internet. We are so used to it though that many people don’t even realize it. A five-year-old boy, whose parents both work full-time and make $75,000+ a year, is already playing games and watching videos on his parents’ iPad. Even at five years old, he is already included in the 97% of households making $75,000+ per year who are active on the Internet. (Zickuhr, Smith 2). When asked about the digital divide and the idea that some people are left behind without technology, his reply came with the simplicity and innocence that is becoming increasingly rare today: “I don’t think it’s fair”. And really, if we think about it, he’s right. His answer was a reaction to the idea of some people not being able to afford the new technology, and not about people who chose not to use it. While technology is becoming more widespread throughout the world, a good part of the world’s population are still living in poverty and unable to afford this technology. According to globalissues.org, nearly half of the world population lives on less than $2.50 each day. For those people who cannot afford the technology, falling into the digital divide is not a choice but something they are forced into. The widening of the digital divide is splitting our world apart, even if today’s generations don’t fully realize it.

A part-time kindergarten teacher, was given a “school computer” on her first day of work that she is required to use to email parents and post grades online. Her first teaching job, working with second graders in 1991, did not include any technological aspects and grades and contacting parents were done entirely through face-to-face interaction and sending letters in the mail. Her reliance on the Internet to get her job done is a new experience to her. Her husband, on the other hand, has embraced technology since its beginnings. While he grew up without the Internet, he was still young enough when it began to become popular to adapt to it. When I asked him what he thought about digital literacy and the digital divide, he stated that technology has given us the ability to close our lives off from other people if we choose, and allows us to disengage from the world. This has been even truer now with the invention of smartphones that allow us to connect to the Internet nearly anywhere we go. Daniel Rushkoff echoes this idea in his book *Program or be Programmed* where he says, “The digital age offers us all the opportunity to recognize the dislocating bias of our interactive media. With that knowledge, we may choose when we wish to live and work in real places, with one another and in person” (Rushkoff 51). Even if my father has adapted to the Internet and new technologies, he can still see how the world has changed since he was a child and he can recognize the direction our society is heading with our increasing usage and dependence on technology. He also noted how many young drivers don’t even know how to get directions somewhere without using a GPS system or Google Maps, and how even our daily lives would collapse without the Internet.

In short, as new generations rise and grow up around the Internet, their understanding of how much it affects them lessens. Children like my little cousin who, right now, simply enjoy playing on their parents’ iPads will grow up never knowing a world without this technology. That will make it even harder to achieve digital literacy or spark a change in our society, as they will not even realize how they have changed from their parents and grandparents. The digital divide is a very real thing, but when a time comes where there is nobody left who grew up without this technology, who will say no? Eventually, the digital divide will simply be those who cannot afford it. And with the increasing availability and decreasing prices of computers and smartphones, that may not be much of a problem 50 years from now. However, if we want a change, we need to follow Rushkoff’s ideas and learn to control our technology before it’s too late. Otherwise, there may come a day when there is nobody to realize how much we are being controlled or remember what society was like before the Internet.