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Measuring the Digital Divide

The digital divide is composed of several facets with differing levels of potential impact. While the term’s definition could be argued, it’s generally thought of as a person’s access to, use of, and knowledge thereof digital technologies used for attaining information and communicating (Mossberger, Tolbert, and Stansbury 1). Those who research the digital divide often also look at the demographic and socioeconomic status in correlation with their place in the divide. Knowledge and ability to use such technologies can also be more broadly coined as digital literacy. In modern society, many measure the digital divide using the internet in terms of how much access an individual or family has to the internet, the speed of their connection and any restrictions related as well as their ability to navigate and find what they want on the web and use it to their advantage. As many job applications go strictly online, as well as homework assignments and communication channels such as email or IM, many would agree that it’s become almost a necessity to have a working computer with internet access in today’s demanding world. During personal interviews it was also quite obvious that a person’s need for more access or knowledge of digital technologies is one of the most determining factors in where a person falls in the digital divide, since two people can have the same literacy and access yet their lives demand different levels of these.

Many realize the digital divide is a real-life struggle for many children, adults, and elderly alike. Being unable to afford the technologies or services offered today leave many on the wrong side of the digital divide, and the statistics can be alarming considering the consequences of not being able to afford an internet connection in today’s digitally demanding world. When surveying teacher’s views on the digital divide, “Teachers of the lowest income students [were] more than twice as likely as teachers of the highest income students (56% v. 21%) to say that students’ lack of access to digital technologies is a “major challenge” to incorporating more digital tools into their teaching” (Purcell). It’s for this reason that programs such as the FCC lifeline program or internet essentials by Comcast have been created. The FCC recognizes that being able to make and receive calls is almost essential to most Americans, which is why the lifeline program was created to help subsidize the price of owning a cell phone by giving income-eligible citizens a free basic phone with 250 minutes and unlimited texting every month (“Lifeline”). Similarly, internet essentials by Comcast gives very cheap internet access to families with kids on free and reduced lunch and was created because they saw that many students are required to have internet for some classes to complete many essays or research projects, especially if the students schedule prevents them from exploiting their schools resources (“InternetEssentials”).

The digital divide is also measured by a person’s need for the internet. Two people could share similar ways in which they can access the web and have common knowledge on how to use and navigate it, but one of the people could be suffering because they are required to have more access or be more digitally literate, which was apparent in the interviews conducted. The first interviewee was Amanda Schwabe, a full-time college student who is also employed part-time while attempting to keep up with a somewhat active social life as well. To be able to successfully be efficient sustaining a good standing in school, work, and her social life, she says she “absolutely needs cell phone and internet access with her wherever she goes” (Schwabe). This is why she owns not only a personal laptop with home WiFi, but also an iPhone, capable of calling, texting and also connecting to the internet at download speeds of up to 12 mbps on Verizon’s 4G LTE network. For her life, it’s completely plausible that such technologies are needed to stay in contact with her work and friends, and be able to complete schoolwork. Glenn Breimon, another interviewee is on the opposite side of the spectrum. She’s retired, and spends much of her time simply taking care of her husband and making crafts at home. While she owns a smartphone and has a high-speed internet connection at home, she barely sees the need for it. “I’ve practically been talked into it” she says, claiming that family, friends, and sales people have convinced her of buying these technologies that “go to waste because they’re never used” (Breimon). This is the perfect example of how two individuals can have the same access, but have differing views and effects because of their need for technology due to their demographic and socioeconomic aspects.

The other interviewees also portrayed the fact that need is a major consideration in deciding whether a person is on the opposite side of the digital divide or not. David Norman Jr. is a teenage boy that owns an Xbox, basic cell phone, and laptop. While he is digitally literate, he only needs enough basic knowledge to be able to use a computer for homework assignments. Beyond that, he plays video games online as a hobby which just requires his broadband connection (Norman). Norman is among the 70% of American families that now enjoy a broadband connection (“Nationwide Computer Donation”). Karen Stansberry, an adult woman who works in retail demonstrated her need for the internet in her responses. “I most certainly would not have been able to locate and apply for jobs without it” emphasized Stansberry, “they’ve made it impossible to find work without the internet” (Stansberry). When times are tough and especially when someone is unemployed, paying for internet and a computer can be impossible, leading to a vicious cycle.

As shown by the research of major organizations and the personal interviews conducted, where an individual lies in the digital divide spectrum depends upon several key factors. These include an individual’s access to digital technologies, their digital literacy, and their basic need for such tools. One can see how a person’s need will dictate how their access and knowledge of technology places them digital divide range and that while there are organizations, institutions, businesses, and people out there trying to improve this divide to gain equal opportunity for everyone, this is still a trending conflict.

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