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DTC 101

**DIGITAL DIVIDE NARROWING OR WIDENING?**

The digital divide crosses generations, class, and races. It is a child that gets behind in his online homework, because his only access is at school. It is the unemployed who can’t afford to have the Internet, yet need it to apply for jobs. It is my father who wishes to write a successful travel blog, yet is confused on the basics of blogging. There is no easily determined marker, and as consequence many people fail to stay current and digitally literate. While there are non-profit programs, and some government programs, trying to make people digitally literate, cable conglomerates still present an obstacle in bridging the digital divide. With all these varying factors it is important not to compartmentalize people into the haves and have nots, but rather get to the root of the issues.

Digital literacy is a language of sorts, and like any language the younger you learn it the more fluent you are, and the older you become, the steeper learning curve. Often times older people are fearful of new technology, and that fear inhibits them from learning. According to the PEW research center, 93% of 18-34 year olds regularly use the Internet, whereas only 30% of people 75 or older do. (Raine, L). My grandmother and savvy investor Dorothy Oliver bucked that trend, as she would send me emails well into her 90’s. She once told me that she did not want to be like her mother who was afraid to use the telephone. The baby boomers are doing at better job at digital literacy, with over half using the internet on a regular basis (Raine, L) Yet they still lag behind, and that fear gets in their way. Take my father Padraic Burke, he lives and travels extensively in South East Asia. He is trying to start a blog on his experiences and hopes to make it successful in the future. While my father is an excellent writer, he lacks the technological knowhow to make his blog successful. His fear of technology leads him to read books about the technology rather than learning hands on. This is problematic because sometimes reading an instructional booklet can make the technology all the more confusing and mystifying to the inexperienced. While many baby boomers are becoming technologically savvy, as they retire they may find a bigger obstacle in their effort to stay ahead of the digital curve - money.

Money and class cause the biggest gap in digital literacy. Many problems arise from this inequality. 98% of people making over $75,000 use the internet regularly, while only 65% of people making less than $30,000 use the internet regularly (Rainie, L)*.* This gap is even in wider in how they are accessing the web. For lower socio-economic classes often times the only way they access the internet is via their smartphones (Crawford, S). A cell phone, like an email address, is essential for the job market of today. The problem is many people cannot afford to pay for both a cell phone and internet. This is particularly true in areas where wired cable plans are exceedingly expensive (Crawford, S). So people often choose to buy a smart phone instead. The issue with only having a smart phone is that the bandwidth capacity is limited, so downloading may take longer, and cause your smart phone to crash (Crawford, S). Then there are the simple physical limitations of a smart phone. Applying for jobs and typing long professional emails is much more difficult on a 5x2.5 touch screen. This divide could be narrowed if cable conglomerates offered more affordable high-speed internet plans, but that is not in their financial interest (Crawford, S). Unlike in other countries where government has made high speed internet a priority, the cable companies have hampered progress in the US. Instead of a healthy competition, the cable and telecommunication companies have merely carved up sections of the country to claim as their own (Crawford, Moyers), thus allowing them to charge highly inflated rates for inferior service (Crawford, Moyers). Even with the highly inflated prices, many lower economic households are signing up for in-home internet service. Connecting to the internet is only the first step in bridging the digital divide. People also need to learn how to use and understand the broad spectrum of its capabilities.

While the digital divide is narrowing for lower economic classes, researchers are noticing a new troubling trend: time wasting. A study in 2010 found that children from lower economic backgrounds spent 90 minutes more per day online than their higher economic peers (Richtel, M)*.* By wasting time they mean playing games, watching videos, and using social networking sites. Wasting time is subjective and sometimes out of that wasted time can come insight, but in general children should not be exposed to media 11.5 hours a day (Richtel, M). My cousin Kimberly Kent who is a middle school teacher has noticed this trend as well, pointing out that some of her students seem to view digital technology as serving entertainment purposes only, and lose sight of the many educational benefits they can provide.

Bridging the digital divide may seem like a daunting task, but let us put this in perspective. In 1930 90% of city dwellers had electricity vs only 10% of rural people; the electric companies argued that it was too expensive to provide service to the rural communities (*New Deal Network)*. FDR saw it as a right, and in 1936 he passed the Rural Electrification Act (*New Deal Network*). Internet access is also a right, and as such we should treat it in the same way that way we treat electricity. This is the only way we can break the strangle hold of the cable companies and provide high-speed internet service to all. Yet we cannot stop there. We must also teach students and adults the tools to use this technology to their benefit. Simply giving a student an iPad benefits no one, but if you show them how they can use it to create presentations, take and edit video, you not only teach them how use an iPad but you allow the hands-on creative mind to flourish. That is what bridging the divide should mean; not only being computer literate but also allowing one to create and control the information that surrounds them.