Justin Oberg

4/21/13

DTC 101

Authoring Project 2

Smartphones and Social Networks Digitally Dividing the Young and the Old

The digital revolution has created the greatest prosperity in the world. Companies are more efficient, there is more information than ever, and we can connect to anyone throughout the world in seconds. However, as the internet has grown, a side effect has emerged. A gap has been created between those who can participate online and those who cannot. This is called the digital divide. The Pew Internet Project highlighted some of these divides in a report called “Digital differences”. Based on their overview, the digital divide is the inequality between people and groups based on varying factors in access to digital networks and inequalities in the needed skills to use these networks (Zickhur and Smith 2). In order to study the digital divide locally, I interviewed five of my family and friends; my brother Sean who is 15, my cousin Evan (18), friend Marco (21), father John (47) and friend Stan (62). I compared my findings with statistics from credible sources. After comparing the data I believe there is a digital divide between the younger and older generations because younger generations are using smartphones in order to be online all the time and are using social networks to interact with their peers whereas the older generations are not.

According to the New York Times there is a significant rise in smartphones. The Times reported that “59 percent of American adults with incomes above $75,000 had a smartphone, and… that more than 90 percent of people at that income level had wired high-speed Internet access at home” (Crawford para. 10). Only two people I interviewed had incomes above $75,000. I interviewed my 47 year-old father about what devices he uses and why and he said, “I have an iPhone, a laptop and a home computer and I use them mostly for work because I need to be connected to the internet most of the time” (J. Oberg). Whereas my 62 year-old friend Stan uses his devices for different reasons. He said, “I only have my computer at home. I use it maybe once a day to check my email and to read articles about the news or other things that interest me” (Mahan). The two adults I interviewed matched with the Times’ data with 50 percent having a smartphone and 100 percent having home internet. I believe this data is common because even though nearly all adults need internet at home, only younger adults require always being online and carrying a smartphone. As Mossberger and Tolbert bring out in their article “Virtual Inequality: Beyond the Digital Divide”, having access to technology does not define the digital divide. They state that “having access to a computer is insufficient if individuals lack the skills they need to take advantage of technology” (1). This applies to Stan, because he has access to a smartphone. Nevertheless, he chooses not to get one because he feels it is unnecessary to develop the skills for a smartphone when his home computer functions fine online. However, the way people access the internet is not the only divide between the young and old. There is also a divide between the generations based on how they use the internet.

The Pew Internet Project studied digital differences in the population and one divide was the amount of people who use social networks to communicate depending on their age. According to Pew, 87% of adults from 18-29 years-old use social networks, 68% of 30-49, 49% of 50-64 and 29% of those over the age of 65. There is a negative relationship between age and use of social networks. I interviewed my family and friends on how they use social networks and how much. Evan my 18 year-old cousin said, “I use Facebook and Instagram. I probably use them at least three hours every day. I use them to post pictures and talk to my friends” (Borchardt). Marco my 21 year-old friend said, “Most days I spend about an hour on social networks. I use Facebook and other websites a lot for my art and for keeping in touch with friends” (Lopes). John my 47 year-old father spent less than an hour a day on social networks and used them for work and talking to colleagues (J. Oberg). Stan my 62 year-old friend does not use social networks but thinks they are useful. However, he said, “For someone my age using the phone and email work just fine if I want to get in touch with someone” (Mahan). My younger brother Sean wants a Facebook because his friends have one, but he is required to wait (S. Oberg). Based on them, there is a negative relationship between age and the amount of time spent on social networks. Those in the older generations are less likely to use social networks than those in younger generations. I believe that younger adults tend to spend more time on social networks socializing because they are exposed to them during their social years as a teenager whereas older adults are exposed to these social networks after they have already developed their social connections. This could present a problem because younger generations know how to use these social networks whereas older generations have a lack of digital skills and could be manipulated. Douglas Rushkoff said in his book “Program or Be Programmed”, “It is not too difficult or too late to learn the code behind the things we use―or at least understand that there is code behind their interfaces. Otherwise, we are at the mercy of those who do the programming, the people paying them, or even the technology itself” (129). According to Rushkoff everyone needs a greater awareness of code, but the older generations are at a disadvantage due to having less experience and have a greater risk of being manipulated by those doing the programming. In order to make sure everyone benefits from the prosperity of the digital revolution we need to make an effort to educate the older generations on how to take advantage of new technologies.

The digital revolution has given us amazing new technologies such as smartphones and social networks and has changed our lives forever. Unfortunately, a digital divide has formed between the younger and older generations. As older generations find small smartphones harder to use and refrain from developing digital skills, the divide will remain. Additionally, older adults who feel online social networks have not much use will be restricted to the people physically around them severely limiting their sources of information. Some older adults might argue that these new technologies are hurting social connections in younger generations. However, I feel the only way we are going to achieve a united connected world is if we can raise digital literacy throughout the entire population, bridge the digital divide between the younger and older generations and have everyone be skilled and accessible to the online world.

Bibliography

Borchardt, Evan. Personal interview. 17 Apr. 2013.

Crawford, Susan P. "The New Digital Divide." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 03 Dec. 2011. Web. 21 Apr. 2013.

Federal Communications Commission. “Fact Sheet, American Job Centers Announcement Event.” Federal Communications Commission, 16 July 2013. Web. 21 Apr. 2013.

Lopes, Marco. Personal interview. 19 Apr. 2013.

Mahan, Stan. Personal interview. 15 Apr. 2013.

Mossberger, Karen, Caroline J. Tolbert, and Mary Stansbury. *Virtual Inequality: Beyond the Digital Divide*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown UP, 2003. Print.

Oberg, John. Personal interview. 18 Apr. 2013.

Oberg, Sean. Personal interview. 18 Apr. 2013.

Rushkoff, Douglas. *Program or Be Programmed: Ten Commands for a Digital Age*. Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull, 2011. Print.

Zickuhr, Kathryn, and Aaron Smith. "Digital Differences." *Pew Internet*. Pew Research Center, 13 Apr. 2012. Web. 21 Apr. 2013.