

INTRODUCTION TO ISSUE 4: DIGITAL DIVIDES

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Of all the issues that have been spawned by the Internet, none has attracted as much scholarly and policy attention as what is referred to as the “digital divide”. The term was originally used to publicize findings from NTIA national surveys (NTIA 1997) showing the large differences in access to IT by low income groups, minorities, women and the elderly among other groups in society. However, the term was reportedly coined first by Markle Foundation President Lloyd Morristette. Whatever its origin, the term has been widely interpreted to cover a variety of gaps in American society, as well as differences between the US and other Western countries and the rest of the world (e.g., Norris 2001).

In this issue, a number of issues and publics are examined to illustrate the variety of findings and conditions that are thought to come under the “divide” umbrella. In the call for papers for this issue, it was stressed that contributors were encouraged to move beyond the usual definitions of the divide in the sense of simple access, and to focus attention instead on social processes and behavior once access had been achieved. Did one find that there were divides in Internet usage, such as in amount of time spent or number of Websites visited? Were users enmeshed more in social networks that allowed to find more rewarding sites or to alert to more useful content? Were certain users likely to be more adept in their searches?

DIGITAL DIVIDES IN GENERAL POPULATIONS:

While there have been many criticisms of the NTIA’s 2002 report, Steven Martin’s lead-off article directly addresses the questionable methodological assumptions about the measures employed to propose that America’s digital divide problem was essentially healing itself. Martin finds inherent problems in using the “Gini coefficients” developed by economists to measure inequality, such as its inevitable increase as technologies diffuse and the government analyst’s failure to examine its inverse – that is the changes in the probability of *not* being online.(which is also decreasing across time). Instead, Martin employs an alternative measure of inequality, the odds ratio, to argue that Internet access is actually spreading less quickly among poor households. Moreover,

while the poor may eventually reach universal access, their catching up could last as long as two decades.

General Social Survey (GSS) data are used in the following article by Robinson and Neustadt, namely the year 2001 re-interviews with 1500+ year 2000 GSS respondents. These panel data afford the opportunity to test dynamic or causal hypotheses about Internet use and the hundreds of other behavioral and attitudinal correlates collected by the GSS. In this dynamic context, most of the attitudinal multivariate correlates of Internet users in the static 2000 GSS data (described as a “diversity divide”) do not hold up using the panel data. One that does hold up, however, is the greater trust in people expressed by Internet users, a question series that showed considerably increased trust in the 2001 re-interview (probably as a result of the events on 9/11). While the increase was found among both users and nonusers, it was significantly higher among Internet users – and importantly by those who had become Internet users between the year 2000 and 2001 interviews. Behaviorally, by the same comparison method, increased Internet use was related to decreased viewing of television, but not decreased sexual activity, church going, newspaper reading or socializing. Appendix A at the end of the introduction in Issue 5 shows the GSS items that were analyzed in this panel study.

The digital divide phenomenon is not isolated to America, as deHaan documents in his study of predictors of Dutch Internet access. Here again, one finds that education and age are the main predictors of access and use, along with certain psychological factors – especially as related to whether one is an “innovator” or “late adopter” in the societal diffusion process. Innovators and early adopters also become more adept at understanding Internet features and also using the Internet for making purchases and for meeting new people for social purposes.

The final article in this section on general Internet usage by Cho and his colleagues is also based on previous literature, namely that on the “uses and gratifications” that users of earlier media from their TV programs viewed or newspapers read. Based on a secondary analysis of a Pew national survey, the authors find that younger and higher status users use the Internet to satisfy their motivations strategically and to gain the desired gratifications. In contrast, younger, lower status users employ consumptive strategies to attain connection gratifications. Older and younger status groups used their interactions to gain learning gratifications.

DIGITAL DIVIDES IN SPECIFIC POPULATIONS:

The first article in the special user section of this issue of the journal that examines differences between men and women by Losh has been rewritten in Issue 5, along with Kennedy, Wellman and Klement analyses of more recent differences in IT use between men and women. Linebarger and Chernin’s small

exploratory study of 74 young children's response to IT has likewise been carried over, here to Issue 6.

In their analysis of divides by location, Donnermeyer and Hollifield find surprisingly few digital divide differences in the four distinct rural communities they surveyed, despite the fact that two of them had quite developed infrastructure for enhancing Internet access and use. They conclude by noting two factors that may affect how the Internet may affect rural users: 1) the diversity of income levels and lifestyles within the community and 2) the extent of economic and population growth across communities.

The final article by Schement examines the specialized roles that libraries can play in bridging the digital divide. By locating the historical strengths of libraries that Thomas Jefferson envisioned, and that Alexis DeTocqueville documented, libraries continue to offer unique avenues for information access with more than 95% being connected. Moreover, more than 60% of libraries use them to go online.