



BRIDGING THE DIGITAL CHASM: ADDRESSING THE GROWING DIGITAL DIVIDE AMONG MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES IN THE UNITED STATE AND AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Internet connectivity and digital skills gap are still present to this date, which is a disadvantage to those who struggle to level up with the changing era digitally. This paper aims at identifying, analyzing and discussing the various factors that may have led to the emergence of the digital divide in the chosen regions by using literature Data and Case studies. It explores the socio-economic, infrastructural, and systemic barriers that negatively impact the ability of marginalized groups to engage with digital technology and benefits. In addition, this paper discusses the impact of the digital divide in education, health, and employment sector in order to stress on addressing these issues as soon as possible. Based on the evaluation of the existing approaches and experience in the development and implementation of strategies, the paper outlines practical solutions to close the digital divide and achieve digital equity. Hence, it is within this aforementioned context of the impact of the digital divide and the promotion of social equality and economic opportunity for those who are 'left behind' in the new digital economy that this scholarship seeks to offer its support.

KeyWords

Digital Divide, Income, Africa, United States, Technology, Minority.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Digital divide has been defined as the gulf in society between informatics and non-informatics or between the digital haves and have nots, it is one of the most significant issues in contemporary societies in terms of social and economic justice. The Internet and the opportunity to use it are gradually becoming essential prerequisites for an active, effective, and valuable life, learning, and work in today's society. However, a stark reality persists: the populations that are on the receiving end of this transition are those from the low income groups, and especially the minority groups in the United States and Africa. This publication, explores the causes of the Digital Divide and offer solutions to bring people together, so that everyone would have equal access to the tools that the digital age offers.

2.0 METHODS

A collection of peer-reviewed papers on e-waste over the last ten years was made feasible via searches on academic research publication databases such as PubMed, Science Direct, and Google Scholar. Through official and unofficial sources, we were able to collect publications, reports from regulatory and governmental bodies, and instructions. The terms "Circular Economy," "used electronic equipment," Digital Divide," Technology", Digital Literacy", and "Marginalized Communities " were used to search the literature.

2.0 FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Socio-economic determinants, geographical location and institutions all play important roles and have effects on the digital divide. There have been discrepancies in Internet connectivity and use as well as digital skills among the population, existing along the race and ethnic background in the United States. In the same vein, Hargittai, 2018 affirmed that internet access in African American and Hispanic homes is substantially low as compared to White homes, which may be as a result of a low density of high-speed internet connections. In Africa for example, some factors like the lack of infrastructure and high cost of internet crimp digital technologies, especially in the rural regions.

2.1 Digital Literacy and Skills

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2.2 Access to Infrastructure

Accessibility of networks: physical infrastructure; Internet connection; power; the reliability of the telecommunications networks is the first factor. Unfortunately, rural communities or other economically less developed countries could be in devoid of these useful resources because developing the necessary physical infrastructures could be very expensive or difficult as a result of geographical challenges.

2.3 Geographical Location

This means that; the availability and deployment speed internet services and infrastructure tend to be lower in the rural regions as compare to the urban ones. This urban-rural digital gap can worsen the other existing inequalities where the internet could potentially hinder the educational or economic progress of people from the countryside.

2.4 Socioeconomic Status

Lack of funds also results in higher percentage of digital divide since the world today is technologically inclined. This is especially so given the fact that the most wealthy people and those from affluent societies are in a better position to buy devices such as computers, mobile phones and tablets as well as Internet connection subscriptions. On the other hand, in this NGT models low income households could be hampered in their ability to secure such resources hence exacerbating the gap.

2.5 Language and Cultural Differences

Some of the ways in which technology may pose challenges for non-indigenous users include the following: The language of the content and services available may not be understood by those who have little understanding of the dominant language used in the society or in the developed world in this case. In the same way, there could be cultural measures determining the embracing of technology in order to close the gap in the digital divide.

2.6 Age and Generational Differences

The older people may have barriers in terms of generational difference in computer use and therefore using e-Commerce sites may not be easy. Such consequences as restricted usage of Internet services and materials by elderly users, which can contribute to extended loneliness and problems with their engagement in the modern digital markets and society.

2.7 Government Policies and Regulations

Government policies and regulations can contribute to the elimination of the gap or, on the contrary, deepen it. Government measures for stimulating the development of telecommunication networks, providing state aids to the population for the provision of affordable internet connections for low-income households, and increasing digital competencies are the key strategies for the reduction of digital divide. On the other hand, some of the regulators like limiting internet connection or banning certain websites widen the digital divide.

3.0 IMPACT ON MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES

The digital divide poses a great threat to minorities' groups future as they are going to lose the privilege of accessing education, health care, and jobs. In education, non-availability of digital technologies and opportunities of online learning reduce academic outcomes in low-income and minorities students [8]. For instance, limited use of telemedicine and health information increase the prevalent disparities in health due to the limited access to health care provisions especially in the outlying regions [2]. Economically digital divide reduces possibilities in employment as well as becoming an entrepreneur hence more cases of unemployment, poverty, and exclusion are witnessed [2].

4.0 THE DIGITAL DIVIDE IN THE UNITED STATES

In the case of internet connection in the United States, despite the fact that there are great improvement in the aspect of technology and infrastructure, this service is still a divided one based on the levels of socioeconomic and racial difference. This paper has identified that, currently, poor households especially in rural and urban areas hardly have access to internet connection or if they do, they are unable to afford the high-speed broadband services. Finally, members of the African descendent, Hispanics or Latinos, and Asian descendent's minority groups suffer from a lack of access and take-up rates for products due to socio-racial and ethnic disparities and digital segregation..

5.0 CHALLENGES IN AFRICA

Likewise, in most of the African countries, digital divide becomes a major barrier to development as well as prosperity. Lack of necessary physical structures, expensive membership to internet services and the availability of geography slows down the access to the digital products in the rural and other hard-to-reach regions. Furthermore, it is also worth stating that concerns that are associated with economic inequality only underscore the problem of the digital divide, as the disadvantaged population groups often experience immense difficulties when it comes to the skills and knowledge acquisition that can help them leverage the given technologies in their advantage.

6.0 IMPACT ON EDUCATION, HEALTHCARE, AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

The consequences resulting from the digital divide cuts across various sectors in life. In the field of education, learners from disadvantaged groups suffer from lack of internet connectivity and learning materials and end up being far behind other students in the society. Consequently, the generally constrained use of telemedicine and health information distort their care, making disparities among the struggling groups worse. In the economic aspect, digital divide limits chances of getting jobs, business, and economic self-fulfillment thus increasing neglect of vulnerable groups.

7.0 ADDRESSING THE DIVIDE: STRATEGIES FOR INCLUSION

To close the digital divide and increase digital inclusion, there has to be a concerted effort at the local, national, and global levels. They must invest in infrastructure (i.e., broadband to the unconnected and policy to make all internet use affordable). At the same time, digital literacy, proper skills training, and other efforts should be introduced to help residents to learn more about digital tools and also increase their capacity to utilize digital technologies. In the United States, government efforts such as those under the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) have shown some success in reducing the divide by extending broadband availability to previously unserved areas [6]. Likewise in Africa, the emergence of mobile technology inventions and community-based training projects are strategies that have led to high levels of digital inclusivity among rural regions [3]. Strategic alliances among government, private business organizations, civil society groups, and international actors are key to achieve transformative changes. In adopting inclusive policies and programs, there need is to prioritize marginalized communities — this way we pledge ourselves to ensure that every individual in the future, irrespective of their socio-economic status or background, has an equitable chance to benefit from the

opportunities offered by the digital era.

In the continent of Africa, governments are aware of the central place of technology in fostering economic growth and the promotion of societal well-being. The primary focus of national policies and strategies is to facilitate a conducive atmosphere for what they term as digital inclusion [9], [10]. These include expenditure on networks, policies, and programs to expand access to the targeted populations in hard-to-reach regions. Kenya, Nigerian, and South Africa for instance have enormously embraced politics that support the right environment to support digital advancement [11]. Progressively a number of African governments are playing a vital role in digital access improvement schemes, which would help in narrowing the digital. The programs cover various policies and projects that aim to widen internet connection scope to include digital illiterates as well as drive technological innovation. Smart Africa Initiative was established in 2013 and is an initiative among African countries that together with their partners aims at fast tracking the economic development of the continent through ICTs to reach more people. This entails policy changes, setting and building of structures and environment for digital development [12], [13], [14]. Connect Africa Initiative is another initiative that has been floated under the African Union whose roles and aims include fostering investment in ICT in Africa. Thus, a vast majority of the African countries has policy frameworks, strategies and national broadband plans that would support development of broadband networks. Such plans normally consist of goals on the targeting broadband penetration, the strategy on infrastructure deployment and policies on investment to champion the course

America as one of the most technologically advanced countries in the world is not behind in the venture into the digital inclusion. However, sustained difficulties and inequalities still mean that it is necessary to remember that it should always be actively worked on so that everyone can reap the benefits of the digital society. Nevertheless, as for access to higher broadband internet connection, the rural areas experience some difficulties mainly because most internet presence is located in the urban areas. They impact not only the education of the citizens, but also their health condition and their opportunities to find a job in the country sides. Some of the challenges are as follows: Broadband options are still costly to some Households, especially those in the lower income group. Another equally relevant factor is the affordability of the new technologies besides the internet, which constitutes the digital environment.

Focusing the importance of the government initiatives, here they are listed. Broadband expansion in other difficult to serve territories is overseen by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) through programs such as the Connect America Fund and the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund [15]. Broadband USA: under the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) the newly launched program offers information tools, solutions and recommendations to the communities that strive to improve broadband facilities.

9.0 CONCLUSION

Thus, the problem of digital divide is still present and needs to be solved by policy makers, practitioners, and academicians. , digital equity, and other appropriate, evidence-based activities will help pave the way for improving the state of affairs of the people of the society and provide equal access to the opportunities of the digital era for everyone regardless of such factors as their status or background. This review also emphasizes the necessity to embrace inter- disciplinary innovation in helping to fill the digital divide to ensure that apposite development is achieved in the USA and Africa.

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