

Digital Divide Symposium

A Conference organised by the IAMCR/ICA by Jana Diesner

November 15-17, 2001 in Austin, Texas, USA

The idea to hold the Digital Divide Symposium grew from discussions at the 1999 ICA symposium in San Francisco when IAMCR president Manuel Parés i Maicas and ICA president Linda Putnam discussed areas of possible cooperation. The first joint symposium between the ICA and the IAMCR was convened by the presidents of both organisations — Manuel Parés i Maicas from Spain representing IAMCR and Joseph N. Cappella from the United States representing ICA. Members of both organisations were represented in the symposium's organising committee: Prof. Wolfgang Donsbach from the Dresden University of Technology, Chair of the Psychology and Public Opinion section of the IAMCR and Chair of the Digital Divide Symposium, Prof. Joseph Straubhaar (ICA), U Texas, College of Communication and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, Prof. Sharon Strover (ICA), U Texas, College of Communication, Prof. John Downing (ICA), U Texas, College of Communication and Oscar Gandy (IAMCR), Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

The University of Texas at Austin, College of Communication, under Dean Ellen Wartella co-sponsored the event. The Rural Policy Institute (RUPRI) and the International Federation of Communication Associations also supported the symposium.

In the 1990's the Digital Divide was defined as a gap between the have's and the have not's in terms of accessing and using new Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The variety of talks presented at the symposium gave an insight into a wide range of inequalities in relation to ICT that led to a broader Definition of the Divide. It was agreed that the Digital Divide exists not only between developed and developing countries but also within countries and between communities and different groups of people.

Whereas previous definitions focused on access as one of the crucial independent variables that determine the use of ICT, current approaches move beyond this definition. It was made clear that access needs to be conceptualized in much broader human and technological terms. A distinction must be made between having the technology available and being able to access and use the content that resides on it.

Today the Digital Divide is understood as a complex and dynamic process that includes a set of multiple divides in terms of accessibility, content, utilization and reception. Those divides are a function of many independent variables including such as generation, region, income, education, ethnicity and identity. In addition to these aspects, psychological and cognitive factors such as anxiety towards new technologies may inhibit the use of the ICT.

Several contributions to the symposium presented Data and Studies that examined various aspects of the Divide. An analysis of the content of web pages revealed that there is a lack of local and social issues in the WWW. The majority of web pages has technical or commercial content, whereas only a small number of community service features is supported by web services.

Other papers concentrated on the diffusion theory and the knowledge gap theory related to the Digital Divide. It was demonstrated that there are primarily innovators, early adapters and the early majority using the Internet today while the late majority still is not very familiar with it.

Comparisons between Europe and the US revealed that even though the Internet was started in both regions at the same time differences have occurred since then. It appears that the population in the US has better ICT skills and a lower technical gender gap than the Europeans. However, in Europe more community projects and public education centres were established that aim to overcome the Digital Divide. Furthermore the European governments offered more general incentives to use ICT such as tax cuts for hardware. While the discussions in the US are more centred around hardware issues, the debates in Europe are focused on content related problems. It was anticipated that a key issue in the future would be to have the right software rather than having the most advanced and cheapest hardware.

The influence of the globalization on the Digital Divide was also examined at the symposium. One contribution presented results from one of the first empirical tests of the transformational thesis of globalization applied to the Digital Divide. With that results a network representation of the Digital Divide itself was developed which showed how economic, political, and cultural networks together influence the differential distribution of informational goods and services.

A systematic cross study of the diffusion process of general-purpose technologies among consumers was also presented. This study analyzed and discussed the potential impact of income distribution on the diffusion of new technologies. It was argued that there is a threshold income level that determines the adoption of new technologies.

New Methodologies and tools were introduced that help to analyze and quantify the Digital Divide. Constraints were identified that result from the structure of the Internet and functionalities of existing information retrieval systems. Other researchers introduced novel Internet connectedness indices. These indices are multidimensional measures for relationships between the Internet and individuals. The ORBICOM members presented an index for digital and analog communication, which relates to the Human Development Index. This Index measures the information state of a country or a group as a function of information density (hardware, software and expertise) and information use (consumption).