INTRODUCTION

Ever since the acceptance of the Internet as one of the major channels for distributing information, there has been much discussion over a “digital divide”. This concept argues that those who possess quality Internet access have a disadvantage economically over those who do not. There have been numerous programs, both government and privately funded, that have attempted to bridge this divide. Here in the United States, especially in Silicon Valley, where I live, just about every business has an online presence. Thus, I am in full agreement that those that have quality Internet access have an advantage over those that do not. However, here in the United States, I do believe that the digital divide is overblown, and most programs that provide free equipment (e.g., laptops, tablets, and smart phones) as well as free Internet access is unnecessary.

EFFECTS OF INCREASED AVAILABILITY OF INTERNET ACCESS

First of all, the evidence shows that the availability of additional devices and Internet access has not resulted in increased productivity to those in the lower economic spectrum. Instead, the increased availability of Internet access has resulted in more time being wasted. Children, particularly those with less-educated parents, are using the Internet mainly for social media and entertainment. Much of this has been blamed on the unavailability of adequate supervision for poorer children. However, children belonging to higher socioeconomic demographics, have also been following similar patterns, albeit, not to the same degree as those that are poorer (Richtel, 2012). In terms of academics, studies have shown that an increase in the availability of computers has actually had a negative impact on poorer children. When broadband Internet access was made available in poor neighborhoods, the test scores of their students were significantly lower in math and reading (Stross, 2010).

WHAT IS NEEDED INSTEAD

Here in San Francisco, almost every neighborhood has a public library, with computers and Internet access available, and anybody that walks in can use them. Those unemployed can easily view job listings at these institutions. However, the few occasions that I have wandered into the library, I have instead witnessed people utilizing these resources for entertainment purposes. There have even been reports of people using library computers to view pornography (Sankin, 2012). Therefore, I do not agree with the argument that programs that provide laptops and smartphones with Internet access are necessary for poorer people to participate in today’s digital world.

CONCLUSION

An increase in the availability of devices with access to the Internet has not been the great equalizer that was expected. Instead, the focus should be no instilling more discipline and self-control in individuals, so that they are using the available technology wisely. Programs that provide free Internet access do not address this issue. History tells us that simply throwing money at the problem rarely fixes the underlying cause.

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