THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

It's not often that politicians and policymakers on the world stage talk seriously about whether access to media is evenly and fairly shared; when they do, those interested in studying or researching the media should probably sit up and take notice.

The 'Digital Divide' is the widely-used label for a range of policy debates since the mid 1990s about the spread of access to the Internet and other forms of 'digital' media. This debate, unusually, straddles political and academic domains, even if politicians' attention since 2001 has started, inevitably, to wane. It is interesting also, because it links the vast, murky currents of global policy discourse to practical, local issues about who is getting something valuable out of the Internet, where, and how? It is rare for 'macro' and 'micro' to be connected in this way, and the opportunity for detailed research making a difference on a wider scale cannot be passed over lightly. This is why, for all its confusions and uncertainties, the 'Digital Divide' debate deserves a chapter in a book on the state of Web studies today.

What exactly is the Digital Divide, you might ask? Who exactly is divided and how? Good questions, especially when there are almost as many detailed definitions of the term, as there are definers. Because this confusion stems from the varied purposes people have in entering into this debate, it makes sense, first, to discuss the broad

political context in which something like the 'Digital Divide' came to be debated at all by politicians. At the end of the chapter, I'll ask what this debate is headed and what its impacts might be on our understanding of how media, economy, and democracy interact.

The Emergence of a Global Debate

The last time media had featured in the global policy arena was the 1970s debate within the UN organisation, UNESCO, about global inequalities in media production and media flows. At that time, developing nations called strongly for a 'New World Information and Communication Order' (NWICO) where America in particular was less dominant in film, television, news, and so on, and more generally where the balance of the media industries worldwide was less heavily skewed towards the richer nations of 'the West'. These policy debates overlapped with the start of two decades or so of academic debate about the exact nature of the 'imperialism' to which America's media dominance amounted – an important debate that continued long after the policy debate fell silent (following the withdrawal by Reagan's America and Thatcher's UK from UNESCO in the 1980s).

Maybe the Digital Divide debate will be the same: a brief span of political attention, followed by decades of academic discussion falling increasingly on deaf ears. That's something to ponder once we've clarified how this debate emerged. Although the term 'Digital Divide' has a clear political ring to it, the essential precondition, without which the term would never have emerged, was the vision, widespread from the 1980s onwards, of an 'Information Society' in which the possibilities for economic

production and social change would be transformed by the new, increased flows of information that computers made possible. The emergence of the Internet in the early 1990s from technical obscurity to (potentially) a global network intensified debates about the future of the 'Information Society'. In the US, the Clinton administration took a lead with Vice President Al Gore calling in 1994 for a 'Global Information Highway'. Crucially, this new vision was more about the economy than about society or politics: 'it will make possible a global information marketplace, where consumers can buy and sell products' (Al Gore, quoted Schiller, 1995: 17).

It quickly became clear, however, that this new vision meant little by itself, especially when confronted by continuing global inequalities in the informational resources. Long before the internet, telecommunications experts at the United Nations and elsewhere had expressed concern about the impact on world economic development of many countries' staggeringly low access even to the telephone, long since taken for granted in the West. How, they argued, could policy-makers not think seriously about the fact (this was 1995, but it's hardly better now) that 'more than half of the world's population lives more than two hours from a telephone' (UNDP, 1995: 2). The answer was to be not so much political strategies to reduce world poverty, as economic strategy: the opening up of world telecommunications markets encouraged by the (now infamous) World Trade Organisation. Already in 1995 UN experts made a direct link between the inequalities over who in the world has access to a telephone and the even greater inequalities over who in the world has a modem. They argued convincingly that poor telecommunications infrastructure was an absolute block to many poor countries' joining the global online consumer market for which Microsoft and others hoped (UNDP, 1995: chapter 5; compare OECD/DSTI, 2001).

Meanwhile, within the USA, there was increasing concern about home-grown inequality in computer access and its impacts on the US domestic market. The Clinton administration commissioned a series of studies by its Department of Commerce (the 'Falling Through the Net' series) which in the late 1990s became crucial reference-points in policy discussions about what came to be called 'the Digital Divide'. I'll come back to some limitations of this research later but, for now, it's worth being clear that the main emphasis was, again, on economic, not political, consequences. The problem with large numbers of the US population not going online, for whatever reason, was seen above all in terms of restrictions on economic growth. Whatever the wider value of these reports, it's worth remembering that their concern was never political or social inclusion but 'participation in the digital economy' (Department of Commerce, 2000: 2).

Meanwhile, partly through US influence, the Digital Divide came to the forefront of international political debate. The G8 Summit in Okinawa, Japan (July 2000) issued a Charter for the Global Information Society and even set up a task force to look into what could be done about the Digital Divide. The task force, significantly, was called the 'Digital Opportunity Force' (DOTForce), a change of language reflecting growing complaints that talk about the Digital Divide was too divisive! A document produced by the Swiss-based World Economic Forum put this point bluntly:

Instead of fixating on the existence of a divide, it would be far better to focus our attention on the "global digital opportunity", because that is what really confronts

us today – an unprecedented opportunity to move swiftly up the path towards

global digital development. (World Economic Forum, 2000: 10)

In other words, the point of raising something as gloomy as the Digital Divide was to

focus more clearly on the possibilities for market growth: short-term political 'pain'

for long-term economic gain.

Not all the voices in the debate were so evasive. An interesting draft document

published by the DOTForce (not acted upon but still available on the Web) talked not

only about markets but also about fears of 'fragmented globalisation' and

'globalisation backlash' (DOTForce, 2000) – we should recall here that around the

same time global leaders were getting used to local and very vocal protests at their

global meetings, such as the Seattle World Trade Organisation meeting in 1999. This

political dimension was one reason why talk about the Digital Divide decreased at the

highest policy level from 2000 onwards.

Even so, the Digital Divide debate continues to matter in other ways. First, the World

Bank in January 2000 set up its own Global Information and Communication

Technologies department, which claims explicitly to deal with the 'new opportunities.

. . [to] assist developing countries in bridging the digital divide through economic

growth, increased jobs and improved access to basic resources' (GICT, 2002).

Second, other countries followed the USA's lead in investigating the Digital Divide at

home. The Blair Government in Britain, when elected in 1997, made social exclusion

one of its key concerns, and its Social Exclusion Unit commissioned research on

access to and use of information and communications technologies in Britain's

poorest areas. The resulting report (UK DTI, 2000) reveals an interesting difference in US and UK rhetoric about the Digital Divide. Whereas US discourse is firmly anchored directed at the economy, the UK report tries to have it both ways, arguing that questions of 'social exclusion' and 'economic development' are 'mutually reinforcing'; in other words, flourishing markets require full social inclusion. A fudge, you might think, since most markets in history have worked perfectly well even through significant groups have been excluded from purchasing power, but an example of the tensions ever present in Digital Divide discourse.

Later in the chapter we'll return to this review of policy debates to see how the Digital Divide has been downplayed by the present US Administration. Before that, we need to be clearer about what the Digital Divide is.

Who is Divided?

The debate, as you will have noticed, seems to be operating on different scales, where possibly quite different considerations should apply. On the one hand, the international debate would seem to concern the divide in Internet access <u>between</u> nations; on the other hand, governments have been concerned about the divide <u>within</u> nations, or at least within their own nation.

The political scientist, Pippa Norris, despairing of how the 'Digital Divide' has 'entered everyday life as shorthand for any and every disparity within the online community', calls the first division 'the 'global divide' and the second the 'social divide' (Norris, 2001: 3-4). The first is concerned with the absolute differences

between different countries' telecommunications infrastructures, information transmission capacity, numbers of computers, website hosts, and the like; the second is concerned, within one nation, at the gap between those who have access to that society's Web resources and those who don't. Both divides are important.

In fact, these aspects of the Digital Divide are both connected and distinct. They are connected, because, as both global markets and online connections grow, it is likely that not only the divide between rich and poor nations grows, but also that, at least within the poorer nations, the social divide grows between elites (however small) who can afford online access and the rest (UNDP, 1995: chapter 5). By contrast, the comparisons in the two cases are very different. Using Norris' terms, the 'global divide' is a macro-comparison of whole countries, operating at the level of total numbers of phone lines and modems, total numbers of Internet users, total numbers of web hosts, and so on. The 'social divide', by contrast, suggests rather different questions about how individuals in the same society differ in how they access, and use, the Internet.

It is possible, indeed common, to look at the intra-societal 'social' dimension of the Digital Divide without raising any questions about individuals' quality of internet use. Many US reports on the gaps in internet access between different income and educational groups, while demonstrating a 'social divide' continues to exist in the US (for example UCLA, 2001), tell us little about how people differ in the 'quality' of their use, a term that itself, of course, needs some further definition.

In principle, however, thinking about the distribution of online resources within a particular social structure should raise more detailed questions about both the quality and quantity of people's use of the Internet. Such questions sometimes arose in debates about different levels of development between nations, for example when it became clear to many experts that merely increasing the number of phone lines in a poor country such as Tanzania was no solution to its digital 'poverty', given that individual phone line access for most Tanzanians was not a realistic target in the foreseeable future; instead, new thinking emerged which concentrated on providing social forms of access to phone links (village phone centres in Bangladesh, 'telecentres' for both phone and Internet access in Mexico). Implied here is a move from thinking about the bare fact of access towards thinking about how that fact connects with the real needs and conditions of those to be connected. But it is relation to the Digital Divide within nations that more elaborate questions about what people are doing with their digital connection arise more obviously.

How are They Divided?

Let's look now, in more detail, at the questions that arise about how individuals access the internet differently, which in turn has implications for the meaning of the Digital Divide'. There are many possibilities.

First, we could simply carry over the approach from analysing the 'global divide' and count up who in a society has a computer and who doesn't, who uses the Internet (at home or elsewhere) and who doesn't. This is the most basic measure and fits with the American media sociologist Ronald Rice's seemingly uncontroversial definition of

the 'digital divide' as 'the differential access to and use of the Internet according to gender, income, race, and location' (Rice, 2002: 106). Even if basic, this is the approach of most large-scale studies of Internet use, particularly in the USA where, after all, most research funding is concentrated. There are currently under way various country-wide US surveys of Internet use: for example, the UCLA Internet Project based in California which returns to the same panel of 2000 or so users and non-users every year (UCLA, 2001) and a series of specific studies of internet use by the Pew Internet and American Life Project based in Washington DC (Pew, 2002a). These academic studies have continued, in a sense, where the US Department of Commerce's Falling Through the Net reports left off.

A weakness, which all such studies share, is how little they tell us about the quality of people's internet use, and how this might vary. This emerges most clearly when their authors make bigger claims about the significance of their findings. Thus in the final Falling Through the Net report (published in the last days of the Clinton administration) the Secretary of State for Commerce, Norman Mineta, proclaimed triumphantly in his preface that 'the data in this report show that, overall, our Nation is moving toward full digital inclusion' (Department of Commerce, 2000: 2). Full inclusion, if it means anything in a large nation's social and economic life, must surely mean more than that a majority log on regularly for some purpose or other. Yet this same report admits that quality of use was not even investigated. As it says at one point (Part II, under 'Location of Internet Use'):

Although this survey did not collect data on the intensity or the quality of Internet use, where an individual uses the Internet – at home, away from home, or both –

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probably reflects some degree of the quality of his or her Internet access. (my emphasis)

Which tells us precisely nothing, because it has nothing to tell.

An underlying problem here is the way that a research model plausible for, say, telecommunications research is applied to a more complex medium such as the internet - more complex, because it is both interactive and distributive: we use it to contact our friends and receive publicly circulated information. Since (leaving aside specific disabilities) everyone knows how to talk to their friends or order a train ticket by phone, you could argue that knowing the number of phones per square kilometre (the so-called 'teledensity' factor used by telecommunications experts) tells you almost as much as you need to know about telecommunications access in a particular region, although, as we have seen, it may not suggest how to solve extremely low teledensity. The same is not true for computers and Internet access. For example, as recent research has shown, there are enormous differences in what 'heavy' Internet users and 'light' Internet users do when they switch on their computer and modem (Katz et al., 2001). Heavy internet users, particularly those with broadband access, are much more likely to spend their time online sending their own documents and information, rather than receiving public information (Pew, 2002b). Light internet users, by contrast, may do little more than access their Web server, look at the headlines and a few links, and check a train time via a familiar search route. Are these two 'uses' to be given the same weight in measuring the Digital Divide, particularly across a rich and extremely diverse nation such as the United States? Surely not, even though such differences are partly just a matter of individual taste.

To assume, however, that such differences are only a question of individual taste ignores the complexity of what is on offer online. The vast online universe of information and services cannot be assumed to be a universal good, having the same value to everyone. The use you or I make of the internet depends not only on the speed and reliability of our modems and our individual predilections, but on our particular needs and capabilities to do so something with the resources we believe are available online. Clearly, researching this requires talking to people in detail. One of the rare US internet surveys which went beyond telephone surveys uncovered striking results. A charity, The Children's Partnership, published a study of online use by 'Underserved Americans', a classic euphemism for the poor and disadvantaged (Childrens' Partnership, 2000). This highlighted what it called 'the Digital Divide's New Frontier': 'content' - that is, the gulf between what people need and what they actually find available online. This content gap can arise for many reasons: because online information is not what particular people need (they may want job and education information, not weather or sport), because the assumed literacy level is too high for them, because it is not in their first language, and finally because the content is not 'culturally appropriate', a vague phrase to cover the whole range of reasons why people of varying backgrounds might be put off from pursuing information or anything else on the Web. One important dimension here may be the degree of social support – within or beyond the family – available to help when you have technical difficulties with your computer or software (Kling, 2001).

Here we get into deeper waters. I mentioned just now that some internet users spend much more time sending their own material, than do other users. Being an active

online producer is related to more than modem speed; it is a question of education and, ultimately, of what type of person you feel yourself to be. 'Low-income people think they're not <u>legitimate</u> information producers', said one community adviser interviewed by the Children's Partnership (quoted Childrens' Partnership, 2000: 24). Suppose this were true and widespread; it would surely be a barrier to the expansion of 'full' internet use. Yet none of the factors just mentioned are measured by simple tests of access to a computer and time spent on it.

There's one other confusion we also need to avoid: assuming that the Digital Divide's impacts are, in reality, much to do with the specific properties of digital media as such. What if the same divides in access and use have characterised all or most information and communication technologies? Pippa Norris's analysis of both 'global divide' and 'social divide' concludes precisely this, that there is nothing different about how the digital divide tracks underlying social and economic inequality (Norris, 2001: chapters 3 and 4). In other words, there is nothing <u>distinctively</u> 'digital' about the digital divide at all. Which means, not that the digital divide was trivial, but that there's no reason to think it can be solved by policies directed at computers alone.

Some Long-term consequences

Once we look more closely at the Digital Divide debate and its omissions, it emerges as one way in which wider social inequalities are worked out through our access to and use of media. As we might expect, the long-term impacts of such a complex debate have been mixed.

First, it has contributed to the development of imaginative projects across the world which confront the real conditions in which people do or do not use online media. A remarkable case is Kothmale FM Radio based in Mawathura in Sri Lanka: an already existing UNESCO-funded community radio station which recently has also become the internet hub for the surrounding rural region, broadcasting information obtained from the Web and encouraging at least the younger and more educated listeners to travel from their villages to the radio station and gain experience of surfing the Web. In this project, the principle of enabling <u>social</u> access to the online world, when individual access is largely impossible, has been imaginatively developed: you can follow up details for yourself at www.kothmale.net, especially the section on 'Internet'.

Second, by putting inequalities in patterns of media access and use onto the policy agenda, the Digital Divide debate has made it a little easier for players <u>outside</u> the magic circle of the World Bank, United Nations agencies, and the largest and most powerful governments, to call for discussion on the world's media infrastructure: for example the Association for Progressive Communications which includes in its 'Internet Rights Charter' a call for 'all citizens [to] have affordable access to the means to communicate, via the Internet, and community controlled electronic media' (APC, 2002).

Third, and less positively, the Digital Divide debate has now, as it were, paid for its political inconvenience, by being rudely moved off centre stage by the current Bush Administration. Not only have federal initiatives directed at the Digital Divide been shut down, but a new Department of Commerce report pointedly avoids digital divide

language in claiming that 'we are truly a nation online' (US Department of Commerce, 2002: 2). The hollowness of the claim is clear, since, although on some indicators (such as race and gender, once other factors are excluded), the gap in digital access has narrowed, in other respects the new report's own findings show that it is very much alive. Income and education remain major determinants of whether people are online and whether, once they get online, they stay online (US Department of Commerce, 2002: 11, 18, 71, 75; compare UCLA, 2001: 13).

All, however, is not lost. One advantage of the Digital Divide debate has been to highlight, for those prepared to look, the range of ways in which significant inequalities are reproduced through media access and use. There is a political link here, although one not yet fully developed, between these insights and a separate debate about where, if anywhere, democracy is heading: the question, in other words, of what quantity and quality of online access and use I or you need to have a change of participating as a citizen.

Oscar Gandy (2002) has gone as far as to argue that here lies the 'real digital divide' – the divide between people considered as mere consumers and people considered as participating citizens. If Gandy is suggesting that the differences in access and use discussed in this chapter are of no consequence, then that goes too far. More likely, Gandy means that what is ultimately at stake in digital divide debates is not, or not only, the health of the national and global economy, but also whether people share the resources to participate in some political space that deserves the name of democracy. If so, then, for all its limitations, the term 'digital divide' is worth still keeping in play.

Useful Web sites/sources

Falling Through the Net Reports: www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/fttn

The research report series by the Clinton Administration's Department of Commerce

which highlighted digital divide issues within US domestic politics.

OECD Report on Understanding the Digital Divide 2001:

www.oecd.org/pdf/M00002000/M0002444.pdf

Thorough background report on the digital divide on an international scale.

Children's Partnership 2000 report: www.childrenspartnership.org

Controversial US report on the digital divide, as suggested by its title: 'Online content

for Low-Income and Underserved Americans: The Digital Divide's New Frontier'.

A Nation Online: www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/dn/anationonline2.pdf

2002 report commissioned by the Bush administration's Department of Commerce

which tries to consign the Digital Divide debate to history.

'Closing the Digital Divide': www.pat15.org.uk

Useful report published by the UK Department of Trade and Industry. An example of the Blair Government's thinking on 'digital divide' issues.

Digital Divide Network: www.digitaldividenetwork.org

Useful site run by the US-based think tanks, the Benton Foundation and the Markle Foundation, that collects information on Digital Divide debates.

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