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Digital Divide and Social Media: Connectivity Doesn't End the Digital Divide, Skills Do

By Danica Radovanovic | December 14, 2011

Whether we like it or not, we live in a very unequal and stratified world. We live in societies in which inequality is ignored in education, science, and in the social media. As Internet technologies are rapidly evolving and new digital divides on the Internet emerge, we must move beyond, at some point, a singular concern over Internet access and technological infrastructure issues. We must tackle socio-cultural differences, we must focus on Internet skills,

literacies and social media usage.

Recently I [finished a study](#) on social inequalities from an Internet perspective (to be published next year) where I examined moving beyond digital inequalities in the context of the technological infrastructure and Internet access. Primarily, those inequalities in the networked world are: the lack of digital and media literacies; critical thinking and communication skills in order to navigate and evaluate data online; an information and knowledge gap; and collaboration and participatory inequalities.

We are already experiencing the way that the old, pre-digital divides are now labeled as new types of divides in the social Web context, such as the connectivity inequalities – high-speed wireless for those who can afford it and second-class wireless for poor and rural Americans have been recently mentioned as a "[new digital divide](#)".

Previous experiences in the scientific, academic, governmental and commercial communities in the last decade and different practices of participatory and collaboration inequality made me curious about this shift. I started to explore in depth and talk about the communication possibilities for collaboration, participation and networking in each segment of our connected lives.

We have a situation where connectivity and access are not a major problem, but the challenges are different. For example, in science and academic communities there are some countries in Europe where the majority of online resources that could be accessed are not being used at a satisfactory level due to many factors: lack of awareness and promotion, digital illiteracy, lack of motivation, information gate keepers, human and economic factors.

I started to explore the possibilities for social media as a tool for collaboration in order to bridge digital inequalities and foster participation, as a subtopic for my doctoral dissertation. The paradigm of the digital divide is a very

complex one. It implies many factors and perspectives, highlighting especially issues and data that I didn't find in the official international European reports and the body of knowledge in Europe in regard to inequalities in higher education and science. Those issues have been present, and still are, during the last decade or so, and it doesn't have to do so much with hardware and internet access as much as with the way those are used.

One recent example involved protests in Moscow where people organized meetings via Facebook and other social networking sites, deploying social media in the effort at bridging the divide between the parliament and the middle class.

Beside the divide in Internet use and in the context of technological infrastructure, there are other types of digital inequalities that move beyond internet access such as information literacy. Information literacy involves, for example, online search, digital, media and networked literacy or technical and cognitive, critical literacy skills in order to navigate online.

As we live in an Information Society determined by a "filter Bubble", with the vast majority of Internet and Web services moving toward the next generation of the Semantic web, access to knowledge and its deployment in everyday work and education is crucial for producing the results and fostering the competence of scientists, scholars and knowledge workers. Access to information is the key to an individual's position in society, though access is not everything; it is only the starting point in many countries and societies as the power structures of society and academia

remain.

On the other side, on the issue of inequality, Anthony Giddens, a British sociologist, considers as fundamentally important the fact that education plays a significant role in either strengthening or breaking down inequalities. Giddens assesses [the role of education](#) as he identifies a new divide emerging between the life chances of those who have the opportunity to experience education and those who do not. He thinks "it's important not to think of the education system as if it works in a vacuum – factors like changes in employment and the economy. We have to work to tackle the root causes of inequalities if we are going to establish a fairer society".

Social inequalities are of course a big issue in information society, influencing media literacy, engagement in political, social, education life, and using the web in participation and collaboration in an online public sphere. They create marginalized groups who do not have access to the Internet and therefore at some point will not be able to engage in social, economic and political life.

But even if new technologies enhance social equality by [democratizing consumption](#) they can also grow a gap caused not by technological infrastructure, but by human not-working, not-collaborative practices.

My preliminary results indicate that collaboration possibilities using the Internet and social media services present one of the communication practices for overcoming inequalities in e-skills, twenty–first century literacies and communication, and foster better collaboration and participation.

The notion of being social on the Web is constantly evolving since we are connected not only via computers but also via mobile phones or handheld devices. The web is getting more powerful and social: new messaging services emerge each month; streamed media is becoming real even for the non-

technical consumer; Google reshapes its services like a child rearranging building blocks; new ideas in federated rather than centralized systems are being explored, and more. The frequent change in layouts, privacy settings and interaction tools indicate that online dynamics require new classes of knowledge and skills to adopt such major changes on Facebook, Google, Twitter and other places in order to navigate and socialize online.

What is important to emphasize is that these digital divides, that go far beyond the pure infrastructure issues, need to become a key focus of engagement for profit and nonprofit organizations as they continue their missions to develop programs for social and digital inclusion.

By creating, developing and fostering knowledge societies in order to decrease the existing divides, governments world wide must create more efficient strategies and programs to overcome such inequalities and not just provide techno-infrastructure.

I would like to hear from you what types of digital divide and inequalities have you noticed or experienced lately? Send your thoughts bellow as comments, @ me on Twitter @DanicaR, or email me (danica at danicar dot org).

Images: 'No Technology' by [Sammy0716](#) on Flickr; 'Don't worry' by Anonymous9000 on Flickr.