Information, Democracy and the Digital Divide

Wayne Buente
wbuente (at) indiana.edu

Abstract

Since the advent of the term “digital divide” in the mid-1990s, the metaphor has served as the basis for a number of research reports, dissertations, initiatives, collaborations and policy decisions. The controversial term carries many popular assumptions which have only recently been challenged in the research community. This metaphorical framing around the digital divide strongly influences its usefulness to policy stakeholders (Courtright and Robbin, 2001), yet implies multiple meanings and ambiguous definitions that complicate research efforts to address the issue. In order to bridge the digital divide, the proper research question must critically examine the fundamental assumptions regarding information, community, democracy and inequality.

The purpose of this paper will be to discern these assumptions by exploring the concept of digital inequality and its relationship to American democracy and, in particular, political inequality. Rising socioeconomic inequality contributes to a divided America. Those who are advantaged by income, occupational success and education are more likely to access and use technology to participate in the political process. As a result, an unequal citizen voice emerges undermining democratic values such as equity, access and diversity. Yet, projects that combine technology and community involvement, such as public participation GIS and community networks, may empower previously unheard voices. An exploratory examination of theoretical democratic models and social informatics may lead to an improved understanding of digital inequality and democracy. back to top