Preface

In this edited volume, authors explore the historical, political, sociological, and economic factors that engender global inequities related to digital technologies. The contributing authors present the phenomenon of digital equity from various critical social theory perspectives. These critical perspectives, together with the histories of domination and oppression on different continents, provide contexts for understanding the fertile grounds made available for the international growth and expansion of digital inequity.

The digital divide is an international, global phenomenon that negatively affects groups around the world. Consequently, the objective and mission of this book is to explore and present research that centers on the historical, political, sociological, and economic factors that contribute to global inequities. Acquiring such insights and knowledge is an important step towards rectifying socially ingrained inequities and a necessary step in working towards global justice in meaningful ways.

All chapters are written from a perspective and philosophical lens derived from a critical social theory. For the purposes of this volume critical social theory is defined as one that examines power relationships and addresses issues of oppression and domination. Typically, such a theory addresses issues of racism, classism, sexism, and/or other forms of discriminatory practices, behaviors, and policies aimed at specific social identity groups that have been historically underserved. Chapters that describe how a particular critical social theory explains the digital divide and its historical development are written with an international focus. Chapters written to look at specific and typically underserved groups examine how their histories and related social and political factors, which were present before the information age, have affected their digital access and use today.

The target audience for this book is composed of academic scholars and educators and their students. Such a resource will aid those researching, teaching, and studying in the area of digital equity or in the broader contexts of social and global justice. Moreover, the book provides valuable insights for professionals and researchers interested in examining issues of technology equity from various critical social theories.

ORGANIZATION

In chapter 1, “Caste, Class, and IT in India” Elizabeth Langran provides a history of the caste system in India, which served to render large populations in critical need of food, health, housing, and basic literacy even long after its theoretical and political dismantlement. She contends that although India is now seen as a global leader in information technology, it is the middle-class and affluent elite “digitari” who are benefiting from the outsourcing of technology-related jobs from developed countries while the impoverished and historically oppressed millions are left even further behind in this digital age.
P. Thirumal and Gary Michael Tartakov pick up on Langran’s theme concerning the effects of India’s caste system but take a closer look at those whose were pejoratively referred to as the ‘Untouchables’. In chapter 2, “India’s Dalits Search for a Democratic Opening in the Digital Divide”, Thirumal and Tartakov specifically examine how digital technology can be used to promote equity through democratic dialogue. While doing so, these authors give a historical background of the socially ostracized, oppressed, and marginalized group, who shed the ‘Untouchables’ label to become self-named Dalits. This history reveals how they were silenced through a lack of voice in non-digital print media but, nevertheless, offers hope for democratic engagement and participation in the open and uncensored digital medium of the Internet.

Chapter 3, “Exploring the Notion of ‘Technology as Public Good’: Emerging Characteristics and Trends of the Digital Divide in East Asian Education”, also evokes notions of human rights and democratic participation. Sunnie Lee Watson and Thalia Mulvihill state, “…technology must be considered a public good rather than merely an article of trade or commodity in our societies.” From a critical social theory perspective, they contend that all human beings have a right to participate in developing their communities and participating in their societies. Open and equitable access and uses of technology to all groups would then render new technologies as public rather than private goods. Further, these authors use this notion of public good to explore, from historical contexts, the state of digital divides in China, Japan, and Korea and the possibilities for embracing this notion of public good while creating solutions for existing problems.

Janinka Greenwood, Lynne Harara Te Aika, and Niki Davis provide insights into the history of New Zealand colonization and the culture of the indigenous Maori. In chapter 4, “Creating Virtual Marae: An Examination of How Digital Technologies have been Adopted by Maori in Aotearoa New Zealand”, the authors describe technology initiatives and projects emanating from Maori and aimed in achieving self-determination specifically in terms of language revitalization and education. As such, they contend that technology adoption by Maori serves to lessen the disparities and divides brought on by a history of colonization and further serves to simultaneously repair some of the resulting damages.

Similarly, Cynthia J. Alexander explores the history of various forms of oppression experienced by the Inuit of Canada, the effects of that history on their current situation, and how digital media can be used to decolonize. In chapter 5, “From Igloos to iPods: Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit and the Internet in Canada”, Alexander specifically states, “New media technologies can be designed to serve postcolonial objectives”, and goes on to specifically describe a web design created for the purpose of revitalizing, passing on, and maintaining indigenous cultures with a focus on language, traditions, and values.

In chapter 6, “The Digital Abyss in Zimbabwe”, Jill Jameson provides a political, economical, and technological history of the African country, Zimbabwe, within the context of the continent’s history. She describes the complex challenges faced by people who find themselves at the absolute bottom of the digital divide, as reflected in the statistics she offers. Zimbabwe, as portrayed by Jameson, is representative of a developing country that some believe is in need of technology infusion and others believe would suffer further at the hands of such infusion. A unique feature of this chapter is that while it offers historical backdrops and supporting graphs and tables, the author presents a fictional narrative in which a character, Themba, navigates through it all.

Chapter 7, “Paulo Freire’s Liberatory Pedagogy: Rethinking Issues of Technology Access and Use in Education” is first situated in the historical context of colonial Brazil and is specifically focused upon the past experiences of African Brazilians. In this chapter, James C. McShay uses critical multiculturalism and Paulo Freire’s liberatory pedagogy to address issues of digital equity in K-12 schooling for these present-day Brazilians. He makes distinctions between liberal multiculturalism and critical multicultural
and further contends that the former does not adequately address issues at the core of the digital divide. McShay looks to the Freireian approach as a model critical multiculturalist perspective, which aims to use the infusion and use of technologies for purposes of liberation and emancipation.

Patricia Randolph Leigh builds upon McShay’s work by also examining the history of the colonization of Brazil through the enslavement of Black Africans. In chapter 8, “Digital Equity and Black Brazilians: Honoring History and Culture”, she explores the history of African Brazilians and the impact this history had upon the maintenance of African Brazilian culture and their ability to engage what some claim as (whereas others dispute the existence of) a democratic and egalitarian Brazilian society. Leigh describes grassroots and government initiatives related to digital inclusion projects in the Black communities and favelas (slums) of Salvador, Bahia.

Chapter 9, “Digital Equity in a Traditional Culture: Gullah Communities in South Carolina”, provides a window into an otherwise isolated group of African Americans in the U.S. Patricia Randolph Leigh, J. Herman Blake, and Emily L. Moore describe the colonization of the Sea Islands of South Carolina with enslaved Africans who would come to be known as Gullah. They maintain that Gullah, unlike other oppressed groups who suffered significant loss of culture, were able to maintain much of the culture of their homelands through their relative isolation on the islands. They further contend that this isolation subsequently prevented their inclusion in digital age networks and communities, which continues to have far reaching negative effects on the future of Gullah culture in this age and beyond.

Francesco Amoretti and Fortunato Musella conclude this volume with chapter 10, “Governing Digital Divides: Power Structures and ICT Strategies in a Global Perspective”. This chapter reminds us again that electronic citizenship, which is seen by many as the outcome of increased access to ICTs, does not guarantee the elimination of disparities between individuals or between countries. As other authors within this volume have stated, Amoretti and Musella point out that the factors and mechanisms that led to these disparities are still present in the information age and, in many cases, the gaps that were present prior to the advent of twentieth and twenty-first century technologies are exacerbated between developed and developing countries. The persistence or even widening of these gaps is purportedly caused by the technology diffusion policies that are driven by a Western capitalistic model.

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