

Foreword

Here is a book for those who would deepen their understanding of inequalities in the information age. As countries throughout the globe face economic hardship not seen since the 1930s, the publication of this carefully developed research handbook on the digital divide deepens our awareness of the stark and trenchant inequalities between those who are engaged in the excitement of the networked public sphere and the networked economy and those who are being left behind. A neoclassical economic perspective might lead one to predict that market forces and maturation of innovative technologies will lead to prices and availability that will eventually erode the divide. Yet the current period of economic distress sounds a clear signal that the invisible hand of the market requires considerable guidance. And the lag between those countries in a leading role and those barely beginning to catch up appears to show little sign of diminishing. Even in the United States, in spite of aggressive pursuit of technological leadership as part of global competition, until recently there was little attention to equity of access. By contrast, the European Commission in its Strategic Plan i2010 constructs digital equality as a central dimension of its strategy. While some countries have embraced the importance of a knowledge society and information economy, others fail to comprehend the fundamental importance of connection to networks that underlie every major global economic and political system.

What was originally viewed as a challenge in access to computers and to the Internet is now understood as a far more complex array of inequalities. Indeed, by bringing together perspectives drawn from several disciplines and modes of inquiry, this volume considers digital inequalities from the vantage points of e-commerce, e-business, e-government, e-democracy, and e-health, to name just some of the societal dimensions considered in the following chapters. Indeed, given the ubiquity of digital technologies in society, economy, and polity, one might argue that consideration of digital inequalities reduces simply to an examination of inequalities in the information age.

The reader of this exciting handbook of research is taken on a richly rewarding journey that begins with important overviews to provide a grasp of the overall landscape. The particularities of regional and country cases allow readers to consider distinct political economies and their relationship to global digital developments. As the concept of digital divide is applied to those groups that experience it with more or less acuity, the reader experiences yet another layer of complexity as the journey moves from those with disabilities to consideration of race, gender, and ethnicity and their intricate intersections with digital literacy and access. Many countries have sought to use digital technologies to strengthen economic vitality as well as to deepen democracy and civil society. Yet the task before developing countries—wrestling with basic infrastructure needs, pricing abnormalities, and other challenges—has often followed a different set of rules than that of countries in the technological lead. Finally, the journey taken in this handbook of research juxtaposes several modes of inquiry—from qualitative narrative to econometric analysis—all of which hold promise to extend and refine research on the digital divide.

As decision makers and scholars strive to understand and ameliorate digital inequalities, this handbook is likely to provide a rich guide to locales, methodological approaches, and current knowledge. Surely, the road ahead demands the type of roadmap found herein.

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