Chapter VI
Digital Divide Redux: Why the Greatest Gap is Ideological
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ABSTRACT

Although the debate on the digital divide has evolved from an analysis of access to skill, scholars have largely neglected the significance of inequalities in the high-tech labor force. Overlooking such discrepancies undercuts the practical application of such analyses; if the most technically skilled workers face eroding job security and dwindling wages, digital divide research is missing a key source of disparity among today’s workers. This chapter examines the latest developments in digital divide research and the high-tech labor market. The concluding section of this chapter discusses what steps workers are taking to close the digital labor force divide and how scholars and managers can meaningfully intervene. By leveraging their unique position as workers who manage other workers, managers can play an important role in creating more equitable working conditions for high-tech labor.

INTRODUCTION

More than ten years after the “digital divide,” the gap in access to and skill in computer and Internet technology, has been identified, debated, and rephrased, large gaps in the digital work force remain. Scholarship on the digital divide tends to overlook or minimize the importance of digital labor force divides (Rodino-Colocino, 2006). That negligence is now as glaring as ever, as the captains of digital industry argue for an expansion of the temporary worker visa program (H-1B visas) that enables foreign nationals to work in the U.S. for up to six years, but with little job protection and for less compensation than permanent residents. This chapter examines the latest developments in the digital divide debate and high-tech labor market. The concluding section of this chapter discusses what steps workers are taking to close the digital labor force divide and how scholars and managers can meaningfully intervene.

BACKGROUND: TWO WAVES OF DIGITAL DIVIDE RESEARCH

The digital divide, according to first wave studies from the mid 1990s through the early 2000s, is the gap in access to computer technologies, especially the Internet. First wave divide research took a more determinist stance toward technology than later studies that considered technological
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skill. First wave studies argued that access to digital technology promised to empower users economically and politically. As the seminal study of the National Telecommunications & Information Administration (NTIA) put it, the U.S. has become “a society where individuals’ economic and social well being increasingly depend[s] on their ability to access, accumulate, and assimilate information” and that “while a standard telephone line can be an individual’s pathway to the riches of the Information Age, a personal computer and modem are rapidly becoming the keys to the vault” (U.S. Department of Commerce, National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 1995).1 The NTIA’s techno-optimism grew along with the 1990s high-tech investment bubble. In 1999 the NTIA reported, “The Internet is a nascent, rapidly diffusing technology that promises to become the economic underpinning for all successful countries in the new global economy” (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1999).

Although the Bush administration cut funds for various programs designed to close the divide (i.e., the Technology Opportunities Program), the NTIA has continually emphasized information technologies’ contribution to economic growth: “The expanding use of new technologies continues to strengthen our economy…As [new electronic] connections open new economic opportunities for more Americans, it is important that all segments of our Nation are included in this ongoing information revolution” (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2002). Starting from the assumption that the Internet, and especially broadband technologies are “transforming the way we live, work, and learn,” the 2004 study suggests that the notion of the Internet as vault to Info-Age riches has become accepted wisdom among policy analysts (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2004). Focusing on broadband digital technologies is important, because “now, more than ever before, high-speed connections promise to enhance our Nation’s productivity and economic competitiveness, improve education, and expand health care for all Americans. High-speed networks provide the power to erase geographic, economic, and cultural gaps” (p. i). In addition to providing a means to connect to education and information providers, access to Internet and computer technologies enables a variety of economic transactions from online banking to purchasing products. The report concludes that “As the volume and complexity of the Internet’s content has grown, so has the need for high-speed access technologies” (p. 20).

Arguing for the importance of skill over and in addition to access, second wave digital divide research critiques and expands earlier studies. Second wave research faults earlier studies’ technological determinism for overemphasizing technological access (i.e., the physical presence of a computer or Internet connection). Examining issues beyond the point of access, titles of second wave research underscore the desire to ‘rethink’ (Light, 2001; Warschauer, 2003), ‘redefine’ (Gumpert & Drucker, 2002), and go ‘beyond’ the digital divide (Jung et al., 2001; Mossberger, Tolbert, & Stansbury, 2003). Research explores different types of ‘literacy’ (i.e., technical, verbal, and mathematical knowledge), skill, or what Hargittai (2002) calls the “second-level digital divide” (qualitative differences in the use of technologies), and the relationship between use and socio-economic context (Sevron, 2002; Mossberger et al., 2003; Warschauer, 2003).

Second wave scholarship, however, does not entirely jettison the technological determinism it critiques but rather, articulates a “softer” version of it. Hard technological determinists view technology as directly effecting social change; soft determinists consider technology either as influencing social phenomena or as symptomatic of them (Williams, 1974). Examining technologies’ effects does not brand one a technological determinist. Neglecting relevant non-technological variables to explain a phenomenon, however, suggests a narrower, determinist view. Second wave divide scholarship constitutes soft technological determinism because it, like earlier studies, overlooks the role the labor market plays in the relationship between computers, the Internet, and work.
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