Chapter XIII

The Digital Divide within the Digital Community in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This chapter looks at the effects of the widening of the gap between the “haves” and “have-nots,” in terms of the digital divide, in Saudi Arabia. It focuses on the divide among members of the Saudi society who already have access to the Internet and synthesises results from four studies about the Internet in Saudi Arabia conducted between 2000 and 2005. It discusses the factors that could be blamed for the digital divide in the country and some of the groups of people who have access to the Internet but are still among the “have-nots.”
Introduction

While researchers in Western nations are becoming increasingly concerned about the effects of the widening of the gap between the so called “haves” and “have-nots” in their countries and across the globe, researchers in the Arab world, particularly in Saudi Arabia, have not yet started looking at the situation in their countries. This chapter takes a step in the direction of addressing the gap concerning the digital divide in Saudi Arabia. For the purposes of this chapter, the discussion of the digital divide will focus mainly on the divide among members of the Saudi society who already have access to the Internet. The situation will be described here by synthesising results from four studies about the Internet in Saudi Arabia conducted by this author between 2000 and 2005 (Al-Saggaf, 2004; Al-Saggaf & Weckert, 2005, 2005; Al-Saggaf, Weckert, & Williamson, 2002). After briefly discussing the digital divide in the literature, a discussion of the studies from which the results were obtained will be presented. Next, a discussion about the Internet in Saudi Arabia and the factors that could be blamed for the digital divide in the country will be offered. Finally, the chapter will talk about some of the groups of people who have access to the Internet yet still stand among the “have-nots.”

The Digital Divide in the Literature

A quick look at the literature revealed that there are many definitions of the digital divide. Perhaps one of the most popular, and most often cited, definitions of the digital divide is that it refers to disparities in Internet access to, and usage of, information and communication technologies between rich countries and poor countries. Another popular definition is that it refers to the difference in access to, and usage of, information and communications technologies between people within the same country (Norris, 2001). For this chapter the latter definition will be used as it suits the situation of the digital divide in Saudi Arabia better than any other definition, because it looks at differences in access to, and usage of, the Internet among people within the same country who already have access to it.

The literature also revealed that most of the definitions attached to the “digital divide” vary in the way they ground the term—that is, identify its social, political or geographical context. This suggests that the “digital divide” issue is context-dependent. Indeed, there are many accounts of the digital divide, and each of them considers the issue from a specific context that is different to any other. Perhaps this is a good thing, because according to the literature, the term means different things to different people. Thus, if the term is not grounded in a particular context, it may leave wide open doors that could lead to misconceptions about the issue.