Helping to Bridge the Digital Divide with Free Software and Services

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ABSTRACT

The growing importance of digital media in citizens’ participation in government is a major issue in obtaining government services, elections and campaigning in the 21st century. In order to participate in the consumption and creation of online media, citizens must have access to, and knowledge of, appropriate technology resources. There exists a gap between those who have access to technology and those who do not—a gap commonly referred to as the digital divide. While there are many different aspects to the digital divide, one of them is access to the software necessary to participate in digital media. A potential solution to the software component of the digital divide is the use of open source software and free online services. Implementing these solutions can play a part in narrowing the digital divide and producing better-informed citizens more capable of participating in the modern electoral process.

INTRODUCTION

Recent national elections in the United States have shown that new media, the use of Internet resources, is playing a critical role in the campaigns and elections of government officials. Personal networking technologies, Web 2.0, and the online presence of many people from all walks of life are influencing the modern electoral process. This places a new, and critical, importance on information literacy and information access.

In addition to electoral activities, citizens’ interaction with government at all levels is becoming more dependent on technology access. Across the United States and the world governments are moving to online electronic services for basic service provision in order to both save money and provide easier, faster access to citizens. While this move is making services easier to access online, it may also make those same services more difficult to access via traditional means like the telephone or face to face communication in an office.

The problem connected to this ever-growing online presence of government officials and government services is that not everyone has access to the technology. The difference between technology haves and technology have-nots in society is generally referred to as the digital divide. While there are many different perspectives on the cause of the divide, and many different potential solutions for solving the different problems, this chapter is focused on the technical component of the digital divide and how to solve the problem of individuals not

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being able to afford software and other services to be active participants in new media.

BACKGROUND

New Technology, New Divisions

As technology becomes a more and more ingrained part of the world’s society technology’s importance to individuals becomes more and more significant. Increased access to technology expands an individual’s opportunities for education and for staying informed and actively involved in the affairs of their community, their country, and the world. Unfortunately, even with the expansive availability of technology in many developed countries today, including the United States, there are still many people who do not have regular access to technology. The commonly observed difference in lifestyle and community participation between people with access to technology, the technology “haves”, and people without access to technology, the technology “have-nots”, is real. This difference is referred to as the digital divide, the difference in opportunity and activity seen between the technology haves and technology have-nots. While the digital divide can be easily defined as a difference between owning or having access to technology versus not having such access, the implications go far beyond simple possession of modern amenities.

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Technology have-nots, those on the negative side of the digital divide, lack more than just hardware and software. These are people who lack access to the leading edge of communication and education. The implications of the digital divide to political participation may rest on the concept that, “Traditional democratic theory is predicated on citizens in a democracy being interested and participating in politics, knowledgeable about how government works and aware of alternate solutions to problems of public policy, and voting consistent with a set of values or principles” (Shelley, Thrane, & Shulman, 2006, p. 8). The increasing use of technology to disseminate political and electoral information means that the digital divide can, in part, negatively impact citizens’ knowledge and political participation.

The dissemination of information, the active discussion of issues, is at the core of modern technology in politics. Access to this information is what the digital divide is really about in the political arena and the information itself, the way in which it is accessed and used, is new. To completely understand the importance of technology access for engaged citizens the format and content of new media must be understood.

New media may be broadly defined as media that is, “...fluid, individualized connectivity, a medium to distribute and control freedom” (Chun & Keenan, 2006, p. 1). In terms of specific technologies, new media can include blogs, social networking sites, virtual worlds, and more traditional technologies such as personal web sites and online distribution of digital media (Caudill & Noles, 2009). As a new and still developing category of technology, the definition of new media is still evolving. Basically, the term speaks to a culture of connectivity and the ability for individual voices to reach broad audiences virtually instantaneously.

As a single, but powerful, example of this phenomenon, while writing this chapter the author’s hometown was struck by a tornado outbreak. While the mainstream media was still struggling to get detailed reports out, individuals had already posted video to the web from multiple locations in the city documenting not only the aftermath of the storm, but also multiple perspectives of the actual tornado touchdowns. Information was available almost instantaneously, and this occurred in the aftermath of the worst storms on record for that area, in a city where main roads were closed and power outages were rampant.

Admittedly, tornado outbreaks are a vastly different phenomenon from political activity, but the power and pervasiveness of new media reach across the categories. The principles involved are very similar. Whether the topic is a natural disaster or a political one, news of the event can reach a world audience almost
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