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**Re-theorizing the “digital divide”: Identifying dimensions of social exclusion in contemporary media technologies**

The digital divide is the disparancy in access to information, in the ability to communicate, and in the capacity to make information and communication serve full participation in the information society. Indeed, the conversation about the digital divide has developed over the last decade from a focus on connectivity and access to information and communication technologies, to a conversation that encompasses the ability to use them and to the utility that usage provides (Wei et al., 2011). However, this conversation, while transitioning from technology to the skills of the people that use them and to the fruits of their use is limited in its ability to take into account the social role of information and communication technologies (ICTs).

One successful attempt in conceptualizing the social impact of the differences in access to and utilization of digital communication technologies, was developed by van Dijk (2005) whose sequential model for analyzing the divide states that:

1. Categorical inequalities in society produce an unequal distribution of resources;

2. An unequal distribution of resources causes unequal access to digital technologies;

3. Unequal access to digital technologies also depends on the characteristics of these technologies;

4. Unequal access to digital technologies brings about unequal participation in society;

5. Unequal participation in society reinforces categorical inequalities and unequal distributions of resources.” (p. 15)

As van Dijk’s model demonstrates, the divide’s impact is the exclusion of individuals from participation. Still left to be defined are the “categorical inequalities,” the “resources,” the “characteristics of digital technologies,” and the different levels of “access” that result in differentiated levels of participation, as these change over time due to the evolving nature of technology and the dynamics of society. And most importantly, the meaning of “participation” in contemporary society needs to be determined as it is differentiated levels of participation that are the result of the divide and the engine of the ever-growing disparities.

Our argument is structured in the following manner: We first claim that contemporary digital media differ from the previous generation of ICTs along four dimensions: They offer an abundance of information resources and communication channels when compared to the relative paucity of both in the past; they offer mobility as opposed to the stationary nature of their predecessors; they are interactive in that they provide users with the capability to design their own media environments in contrast to the dictated environs of previous architectures; and, they allow users to communicate utilizing multi forms of mediation, unlike the uniformity of sound or word that limited users in the past.

We then submit that involvement in the information society calls for egalitarian access to all four dimensions of the user experience that make contemporary media different from their predecessors and that the ability to experience all four affects the levels in which humans partake in the shaping of society. The model being cyclical, we then discuss how lower levels of participation contribute to the enhancement of social inequalities. Finally, we discuss why participation is needed in order to achieve full membership in the information society and what political philosophy should govern policy solutions targeting the re-inclusion of those digitally excluded.