DIVIDE OF THE MOMENT – DIGITAL DIVIDE AN OBSTACLE TOWARDS GAINING CULTURAL AUTONOMY AND EQUALITY

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Abstract

Van Dijk in 1999, stated a clear and concise meaning of 'digital divide' that included unequal operational and informational digital skills, apart from differential access only (316). This clearly indicates that there is much more than just economic power that is required to gain digital equality. Hence, throughout the world, sections are clearly exempted from the globe when referring to the term 'global village' for a supposedly connected world. The paper refers to two community based initiatives from the west, in which it was evident that a community based network available to every person requires a healthy social capital and initiative by the community, cultural acceptance and an open political structure much more than just financial resources. India, being a collectivistic rather than an individualistic culture can more easily work as a community to improve upon its digital resources and skills than the west. Since, Internet penetrated in the 1990s, centuries after the rise and spread of the industrial revolution, education and awareness up to an extent, technology usage is nowhere linked with religious doctrines or belief systems, making another way, culturally. Also, a democratic India shows no restrictions towards the Internet politically, as opposed to the Great Firewall crafted by the communist government of China. Hence, it is a cultural catalyst for equality and autonomy that would provide the father and mother, along with the other members an equal ground for knowing and learning in both patriarchal and matriarchal societies respectively. The paper attempts to bring into light, reasons and favourable conditions for striking out another divide from the list of already existing divides.

Keywords – digital divide, digital equality, global village, collectivistic culture, individualistic culture, Great Firewall, patriarchal, matriarchal

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In between the strong racial discrimination that existed in the United States prior to the 1970s, various political divisions that formed a phase in the history of Europe, religious and caste based division in India etc., there is another divide which can be seen today, when the world is labelled as the 'global village'. For a developing nation like India, certain sections of the society can certainly agree with the world being a well – connected global village, however, the poorest villages in India still live on Rupees 7 per day, which cannot even accommodate three meals a day, let alone technological resources. Hence, the question that arises is that - when we magnify the term, 'global village', are there sections in our society, our country, and in the huge mass of land that lies beyond our own geographical boundaries that are exempted from the term 'globe' when referring to the term? Also, in a yet to develop country like ours, is digital divide another added divide that has to be eliminated simultaneously or is it another level that should be considered ones the other forms of equality have been achieved?

According to the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, USA, in its survey study of 2000, digital divide is not only existent in the form of unequal distribution of access. The study also took into account inequality based on skills. Skills were divided into operative skills that help users with operating the hardware and informational skills with which users are able to acquire information using the internet appropriately. Past studies also stated that the divide not just exists based on unequal education or unequal economic backgrounds, but also solely on the basis of gender, with females using information technology lesser than men. However the NTIA 2000 studies found an eliminated divide between the two genders in the USA. Europe was yet to reach a similar, if not identical digital equality.

Guthrie and Dutton (1992) conducted a study among two California communities and found out that very often the political structure of a community plays a crucial role in deciding whether digital divide shall exist within the community or not. Also, in a survey conducted among two communities in Minnesota, the first community (Grand Rapids) saw much lesser digital divide due to a successful community network that also included computer networks established in public schools, libraries and free classes conducted for

people in the community. On the other hand, the second community (Detroit Lakes), culturally more hesitant towards the negative aftereffects of a digital society showed a larger and deeper divide. This research was conducted to dig in deeper into the quality of social capital in both the communities. Grand Rapids with clear efforts to implement and improve their digital information strategies was the community with a better social capital.

Most of the surveys and articles conducted and written on digital divide have originated from the west. It is only extremely recent that developing countries have begun to consider it as a phenomena. Perhaps it is so because penetration of technology into the society is only partial as yet or that there are other divisions, elimination of which may be interpreted as prerequisites in order to reach up to even considering digital divide. However, if we consider the main kinds of divides prevalent in our society, the nature of digital divide is extremely different and may also result in certain benefits giving rise to a different form of equality. First, digital divide cannot be labelled as a divide in itself. It is a result of the already existing divides in the society. Unequal distribution of resources that also include literacy and electricity may devoid people of technology. Occupational hierarchy based on lineage and religious ideals may also be counted as an important factor in deciding the technological acceptance and utility in a region. Hence, digital divide is not a hierarchy constructed historically. It is only a residue left due to deeper and historically embedded inequalities existent from centuries. However, it does not mean that the stimulus that this kind of an inequality is a reaction to, has to be removed in order to eliminate this divide. As an example, the village of Punsari near Gandhinagar in Gujarat has Wi-Fi network available to each and every person among the village population. Just as governmental funds compartmentalized to improve upon infrastructure may help in transforming an underdeveloped region to a region with properly paved and maintained roads, water supply, drainage systems etc., compartmentalized governmental funds in order to establish Wi-Fi networks or provide technological aids can be a lucrative way of building digital villages, with the government investing in intellectual property and human resource. Also, if an individualistic culture like the Minnesota State in the Unites States of America can establish a community network and work collectively towards establishing a digitally equipped and skilled community of people, with computers available in public libraries and schools as well as running free classes for school going children and adults, a collectivistic culture like India should only have very minor and solvable obstacles in its way to a community digital development.

Also, an NGO known as the Tara Mobile Crèche in Pune, Maharashtra, working for children of construction sitelabourers has started a mobile computer class in which more than twenty computers are placed in a bus which is driven around the city to various construction sites with computer lessons at the children's' door step. Culturally and

socially, if implemented, it will establish a kind of equality that will be effortless and natural. With the penetration of the internet, in a patriarchal or a matriarchal system, every member of the family will have the same amount of exposure to information, with the necessary skills. Since access to information through internet is not exposed to a mass together and is controlled by choice by an individual, a form of individualistic identity and autonomy may be received by people irrespective of class, caste, age, gender etc. The change of Arpanet 1969 by the US department of commerce into Internet happened only recently in the 1990s, a long time after industrialization and the penetration of education and literacy into the society up to a large extent worldwide. Hence, none of the religious scriptures, doctrines, belief systems etc. restrict people, on the basis of norms from availing themselves of the internet. Politically, the nation is a free democracy with strong FDI and other foreign policies without any restrictions and resistance towards technological ideas from the west, in contrast to the Great Firewall set up by the communist government of China. Hence, politically, socially and culturally , India has a technologically welcoming environment in which internet may further serve as establishing power and autonomy among every member of the society equally in terms of information technology, if not in the other aspects as yet. Only financial aid would be enough to remove the possibility of such a divide.

Although, it is always questionable that, will people in a country where the poorest people survive on 7 rupees a day, without shelter, electricity and food – the basic requirements of mankind, bother about digital equality? The answer is certainly no. But, in a country that is divided into different economic classes, there will be villages that will need immediate aid with basic requirements such as food and water supply. However, there will be villages like Punsari that will just need attention so that they are ingeniously kept away from new kinds of divide that may emerge and cause new problems. Also, since Internet has emerged from the USA from Arpanet as mentioned above, the most common language in which it is used till date is English. Schools in Indian villages are vernacular in a large amount with population that can read, write and speak only in the native language of the region. So, does it indicate that the use of internet among vernacular population would require them to learn a new language (English) altogether? Not necessarily. Google input tools are available in more than 20 languages, including Bengali, Kannada and even Sanskrit, which means developing soft wares and tools in more languages is certainly possible and should be done faster to stimulate the spread of internet throughout the country faster. Mark Zuckerberg's initiative tied along with Reliance Industries Pvt. Ltd. in India in order to provide net connectivity at rural and underdeveloped places was a half grown dream and initiative since people could have access to some limited sources only, with Facebook at the central focus. It is a meaningful but not a complete attempt towards establishing digital equality since it will only very partially eradicate this divide. For

complete equality, it is important that open source internet is provided to people and that they have access equivalent to what the urban population may have.

Hence, digital divide is not a form of divide that must be addressed after eradicating what basic divisions already exist. It is a very deep divide in itself which may only add up to the list of already existing divides in the society and produce 'information have nots' as well. If recognized now itself, the very recognition can act as a catalyst for further eradicative actions. As already mentioned above, since our political, cultural and social systems are supportive towards the penetration of information into the society, it appears to be a beneficial, quicker and easier attempt towards establishing cultural autonomy and equality.

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