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Americans Digitally and Politically Divided:

Can Limited Skills and Unequal Access to Information and Communications Technology

Impact Citizen Participation in the Democratic Process?

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Abstract

There have been growing and evolving divides in America related to the access to affordable high speed internet and the acquisition of computers skills. These short falls are directly related to the developing participatory culture and the participation of disenfranchised groups in the democratic process. The ability to join this participatory culture and network with other Americans via user created media is an important part of the democratic process today. Defining who the most technology deficient Americans are will lay the ground work for the analysis. The statistics defining where in America these short falls in access and skills lay will provide proof of this problem. Understanding why there are deficiencies in computer skill levels for some Americans is an important part of finding solutions. The circumstances that impact participation in the Internet-based segments of the democratic process need to be addressed to make democracy more inclusive and self empowering for Americans.

Introduction

Communities across America have recognized that the ability to access the internet can stimulate the local economy and develop marketable computers skills in their citizens. Various solutions are on the table to provide more options for high speed internet access in cities and rural areas of America. Cities are investing in free WIFI to provide the poor with access to the internet using wireless technology in hopes of providing a solution. Rural areas are looking at satellites or power lines to provide high speed internet access while waiting for phone companies to run cable to their locations. The larger issue that looms over Americans is related to poor education levels and the absence of media literacy in schools thus leading to the inability of groups to utilize the evolving participatory culture on the Internet. This paper will provide the statistics defining those segments of the population in America and the reasons for their situation. I will demonstrate that deficiencies in computer skills can disenfranchise these segments from participation in the democratic process. An examination of the Dean's presidential campaign of 2004 and other Internet related political milestones will demonstrate the growing importance of the Internet in our democracy. Newer campaign strategies, candidates and constituents will be examined to further demonstrate that citizens need to be media literate to fully participate in the democratic process.

Changing Divides

The 2005 Pew Global Attitudes Survey released in February 2006, reported that the United States currently ranks fourth in the number of computer users world wide. Making only minimal gains in the number of computer users between 2002 and 2005, there was only a two percent change from 74 to 76 percent of Americans that use a computer anywhere occasionally (Truly a World Wide Web, 2006) . Over three years the United States should have made greater gains in computer usage if the digital divide was shrinking. What is happening with the digital divide in America?

In the 1990's the "digital divide" was first defined as the disparity between the technologically advantaged and the technologically disadvantaged. In recent years the definition has been expanded to include the gap in access speeds to the internet (Digital World, 2003). With networks, bandwidth and technology advancing rapidly and spreading throughout the country, there remain groups that do not have access to computers and the internet. In 2006, the divide discussion moved to the "Participation Gap" where deficits in computer skills, social networking skills and experience with the developing participatory culture are unequal (Boyd, 2006). Now there is another level of the divide that has blossomed within the discussion of technological inequalities, the political participation divide (Herrnson, 2007). This new divide represents the gap in political participation between the more educated people, who are politically active on the Internet, and those who lack access, skills, technology or interest in politics on the Internet. The same divide occurs between those who vote and those who do not. Poor, uneducated people vote at a much lower rate than wealthy, educated people.

Connections At Home

The U. S. Department of Commerce (DOC) conducted their own analysis of the use of the internet in America using census data. Published in 2002, “A Nation Online: How Americans are Expanding Their Use of the Internet”, it focuses on whether a computer and internet connection are physically within the household. The DOC statistics further clarify the groups of Americans disenfranchised from computer technology and the Internet. The DOC reported that 54.6 percent of U.S. households had broadband access to the internet. But only 24.7 percent of rural Americans have broadband connections, leaving rural America on the losing side of the digital divide (A Nation Online, 2002). The Pew Internet and American Life Project released new information related to the technology gap in rural America in February 2006. Pew’s data is based upon phone surveys and it found that the internet gap has been closing in rural areas. Pew reported that 24 percent of the adults in rural America now had high speed internet access at home (Rural America, 2006). I question the accuracy of Pew’s data and their collection methods. When comparing the DOC 2002 results, extracted from U.S. Census data, of 24.7 percent with the Pew 2006 phone survey data of 24 percent, in four years there has been no real change? So how can Pew say that the gap in the digital divide is closing? These statistics demonstrate that there needs to be more accurate data collected to evaluate the actual scope of the many digital divide related inequalities in rural America.

Groups and Reasons Identified

The Pew Internet and American Life Project conducted a survey in May-June 2005 to examine who is using the Internet in America. Pew’s 2005 survey found that 65 million or 32 percent of Americans do not use the internet (Fox, 2005). Their results present an overall picture of where particular groups in America are in relation to the Internet. The groups with the larger

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gaps are non-high school graduates where only 29 percent use the Internet, Hispanics at 31.8 percent, senior citizens at 26 percent and African-Americans at 57 percent. The technologically skilled white Americans have the smallest gap at 70 percent, parents with minor children at 83 percent and college graduates at 89 percent are using the internet (Fox, 2005). After examining these results the conclusion I have drawn is that an individual's education is the major factor impacting whether they have Internet technology skills and are, thus, fully able to dive into participatory culture and the new Internet-based areas of the democratic process. One of the major reasons given in the survey for not using the internet was economic. The economic reasons relate to the cost of technology, software and internet access. The lack of computer skills, distrust of the internet, language and cultural barriers, unavailability of affordable high speed internet access and having no interest in the internet were the other reasons given by survey respondents (Fox, 2005).

The two groups with the greatest disparity in the participation gap are African-Americans and Latinos (Gilbert, 2006). In *Race, Place and Information Technology* the belief that concentrations of poverty throughout America, or "place" rather than race are responsible for the participation gap impacting African-Americans. It continues to explain that for Latinos ethnicity and racial segregation were seen as the main reasons for their lack of computer skills. In discussing poverty statistics Gilbert reports that 94 percent of the concentrated poor live in the cities of the Northeast and Midwest, where 40 percent or more of these populations live below the poverty line. This report deduces that the poor urban areas for many decades have been severely deficient in basic education, opportunities, housing, and employment and these circumstances have lead to disparities in both economic and political participation (Gilbert, 2006).

Influencing Factors

Factors that influence the relationship of people with technology include education level, age, income, geography, race and culture (Toward Equality of Access, 2004). The quality of education, reading ability and whether media literacy is part of the curriculum are important influences on a person's ability to participate online. Internet related skills like search techniques, the ability to use and evaluate the information found in a meaningful way, and social networking skills are required. Many poor communities have inadequate education systems with high dropout rates and their students do not achieve the literacy levels required for effective utilization of the Internet (Gilbert, 2006). For rural and poor Americans the participation gap is a barrier to information, services, education, participatory culture, networking and political discourse. Arch and Rodriguez concluded in their paper "Beyond Closing the Digital Divide" that the Community Technology Center (CTC) grant project begun in the 1990's did more than reduce the gap in the digital divide for the Hispanic community in Washington County, Oregon. Their CTC project demonstrated that "technology can provide the means for economic improvement, social integration and a sense of personal empowerment." (Arch, 2002). These CTC programs have provided the technology, staff and community based support which has enabled Hispanic participants, who could not use a computer before, to create a Power Point presentation in six months. These basic computer skills along with interactive software have enabled this community to learn English, reading and writing which makes these participants more productive members of their community.

Impact of National Literacy

The National Center for Education Statistics released a report in April 2007 that examined the literacy of adults in America in 2003. The report is called Literacy in Everyday

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Life: Results from the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy and it defines three areas of literacy used in their assessment, quantitative literacy, prose literacy, and document literacy. The two areas related to the use of the Internet are prose literacy, which centers around the skills required to search, comprehend and use continuous texts, like news stories and editorials. The second is document literacy based on the ability to use these same skills in non-continuous texts, like maps and forms (Boyle, 2007). Chapter six of this report contains statistics on the impact of literacy levels on civic and community involvement. Of particular interest for this paper are the statistics relating literacy levels to ethnicity, voting and the utilization of Internet and traditional sources of information about the community, politics and government. Generally, the prose and document literacy levels for African-American and Hispanics groups are substantially lower than literacy levels for white adults. For prose literacy levels 67 percent of African-Americans and 74 percent of Hispanics are at or below basic literacy compared to 32 percent of white adults (Boyle, 2007). With document literacy the gaps are similar with 59 percent for African-Americans and 62 percent for Hispanics at or below basic literacy compared to 27 percent of white adults (Boyle, 2007). The literacy levels found for use of the Internet for community and government information show that 77 percent of adults with below basic literacy levels, 53 percent with basic literacy and 31 percent at intermediate literacy did not use the Internet as a source for information (Boyle, 2007). When examining email use of these groups by literacy levels I observed the numbers are very similar to Internet use which implies that computers and user created media are not in their set of skills. For those who participated in the 2000 elections by voting the prose and document literacy numbers were better than the numbers for Internet use. Voting participation for prose literacy in adults at below basic literacy was 53 percent and at basic levels 62 percent. For document literacy, which is more closely related to the use of a

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voting machine, 57 percent of adults are below basic literacy and 63 percent at basic literacy cast their ballots in 2000 (Boyle, 2007). The statistics in this report reinforce the information already presented about the low levels of education impacting African-Americans and Hispanics adults. This new report relates their use of computers, technology and deficiency in those skills required for user created media to actual events that denote participation in the democratic process. These statistics in Literacy in Everyday Life: Results from the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy documents that an inability to use the technology common in political networking on the Internet is coupled with low levels of participation in the democratic process.

The Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Education Fund (LCCREF) released a report in September 2005 stating that “the digital divide between online Americans and those falling through the net is large and continues to grow” (New Research, 2005). LCCREF found that education and income levels did not fully explain the digital divide in some minority communities. Racial, language and cultural variables impact whether some groups even own a home computer. Using census data for this report, LCCREF highlights the fact that African Americans, Hispanics and Native Americans are less likely to have a home computer and internet access and income level is a minor factor in this decision. Spanish-speaking groups are the least likely to have a home computer and internet access (New Research, 2005). With eighty percent of the pages on the internet in English (Digital World, 2003), this could be the reason for a language divide within the Internet. Wade Henderson, Counselor to LCCREF and Executive Director of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, captured the heart of the issues when he stated “The digital divide debate is not a debate about gadgets or even markets. It is a debate about who gets to speak and to hear and for what price, and to whom” (New Research, 2005).

By 2050 it is predicted that minorities will represent 40 percent of the population in

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America with the majority represented by Hispanics (About e-learning, 2006). But who knows what the internet will look like in 2050? There is a growing Hispanic market in the United States. The U.S. Census Bureau recently reported that Hispanic businesses are growing three times faster than the national average and generating more than \$200 billion in annual revenue (Miller, 2006). This positive growth in the business sector does not explain why Hispanics are the largest group in America to fall below basic literacy levels. These low literacy levels and language barriers have contributed to the lagging adoption of computer and social networking skills for the growing political participatory culture on the Internet. Hispanics will be excluded from the most active discussions of political issues if they are not on the Internet.

Politics On the Internet

The 2004 presidential campaign was a pivotal period in the successful utilization of Internet campaign strategies. Dean's ill-fated bid for the presidency was propelled early in the primaries through the use of new Internet-based strategies. Blogs, online fundraising and political social networking were useful tools in the campaign. The Dean campaign proved that the blog could be a powerful tool for recruiting volunteers and organizing local support groups within the new participatory culture. Political fundraising was changed forever when the Internet enabled his campaign to raise millions of dollars from millions of small contributions. What is central to the success of this Internet campaign? The ability of any American to access the Internet, use the computer software, forward and compose emails, interface with blogs, use your credit card to make a contribution online and utilize other internet-based tools created by the campaign. Without basic literacy computer skills can not be acquired and the opportunity to contribute and participate in the political discourse on the Internet is lost. The Internet has helped

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to empower citizens by enabling them to easily contribute their energy, thoughts, opinions, and money.

Today the strategies of campaign 2004 have evolved into blended networking strategies where one form of media drives people to other media (Barko Germany, 2006). Blended networking combines traditional forms of campaign media like print, radio and television with blogs, web sites, Internet based video, email, and other internet-based media tools. The purpose of blended networking is to create a web of interconnected media, with each media presentation feeding traffic to the others and giving people the power select what they want to view. Pew Internet and American Life Project recently released a report called Election 2006 Online, which analyzed the impact of the Internet on the mid term elections in 2006. Through telephone interviews and daily tracking surveys Pew found that 31 percent of Americans utilized the Internet for obtaining political news and information and email for political discourse (Raine, 2007). Blogs were used by 20 percent of the respondents for their main source of campaign news and information. This survey revealed the existence of an Internet-based political elite that represented 23 percent of campaign Internet users or about 14 million Americans (Raine, 2007). User created media is important for this elite group who became political activists' by creating personal websites and blogs to drive campaign discussions. The elite regularly posted their personal thoughts and ideas about campaign related issues on the blogs, websites and newsgroups of other politically active individuals and groups. The Internet has become the source for multiple views and opinions about the issues of the day. Giving those who are utilizing the Internet politically a broadened view and the ability to learn and grow from the online discourse.

Conclusion

It is apparent from my research that the main obstacle preventing people from participating in user created media and the democratic process is rooted within the education systems in America and basic literacy levels. Both the federal government and private organizations have published reports confirming this situation. Without the ability to read, comprehend, analyze, and use information you can give Americans free computers and internet access and many will not be able to acquire the skills needed for user created media. Statistics have shown that these same people will not participate in the democratic process, especially the internet-based segments of the political process. Unfortunately two main segments of the American population, African-Americans and Hispanics, have great difficulty in acquiring the skills required for user created media and the Internet because of their persistent poverty. These disenfranchised Americans live in pockets of concentrated poverty where the school systems are poorly equipped and their curriculums are inadequate for the twenty-first century. The lack of computer resources and education in media literacy has left some Americans unable to attain the skill levels required for competition on a global level. Some rural Americans are suffering the same fate because access to computers and the internet is limited. Small rural towns suffer from the effects of poverty similar to the urban poor thus impacting their acquisition of skills. In rural areas even if the computer skills and media literacy are taught in schools the high speed access to the Internet is severely limited preventing any extensive political discourse online. What can be done to remedy this situation? Basic education in America must be standardized, requiring that curriculums include courses in new media, media literacy and computer software. The focus in education must be adjusted to concentrate on reading, writing and math skills. America is no longer a manufacturing economy it is a service economy which requires that a certain set of

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computer related skills be attained for optimal skill levels. Once poor and rural Americans have the proper education and computer skills so they can thrive both mentally and economically their more active participation in the democratic process and political discourse through user created media online will follow.

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