Bridging the Global Digital Divide: Mapping, Operation and Evaluation of Organizations/

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Abstract

The 21st century has brought tremendous changes in all aspects of life. One of these changes is Technology development. The entry of computers and information technologies into our world has made people become more involved in the financial, social and political aspects of their lives. They carry along with them populations with access to the internet, the skills necessary for using it and open a wide and rich world of information and communication, basic services and connections to distant cultures. However, not every population in the world can enjoy equally, if at all, from the accessibility to this wonderful world. This phenomenon is called: "the digital divide" – differences which exist between populations because of geographic, race, social status, gender and physical capability in two major fields: access to information through the World Wide Web and the capabilities, knowledge and skills which are required for using this information.

The digital divide exists everywhere – between countries, populations, societies and people and the rare many reasons for its existence: the technological factor (new technologies are not implemented equally in different regions, therefore, some populations enjoy them more than others), the economic factor (the economic status varies between populations: some are rich, some are poor and therefore, they cannot afford the same technological facilities), the social-cultural factor (some populations cannot see the advantage of entering the world of information technologies and the opportunities it represents and in some cases even feel threatened by them), the political factor (many countries have a conservative and totalitarian regime which does not allow free choice, progress, or development of their citizens and therefore are left behind) and finally the educational factor (many populations are illiterate, this status does not allow them

to acquire the essential basis for progress in the information world and therefore, are left behind).

The digital divide phenomenon seems to be complicated consequences however, not all researchers view it as a world wide crisis and claim that there are much more serious problems than the digital divide. The digital divide is, to their opinion, a matter of personal choice and every country of population who will want to take part in the information revolution, will be able to do so easily. However, future predictions say otherwise: the percentage of internet users will decrease, new technologies will still penetrate developed countries and populations before developing ones, will reach youngsters before adults, healthy before sick and people with disabilities and so forth.

There is no doubt that the solution for the problem of digital divide will help tremendously because information is a valuable economic and social resource. With its help, a thriving and equal society can evolve. The complexity of the digital divide issue and its connection to every aspect of life has brought many organization s to develop various programs and activities in order to eliminate it or, at least, minimize it. Many solutions have been suggested: the financial market forces, governmental policy, community and philanthropic activities, private and public partnerships and so forth.

The objective of this qualitative research is, therefore, locating the major programs which are suggested today in organizations throughout the world and evaluate their quality, potential and influence concerning the digital divide problem. This research displays the situations of these organizations and points out their activities for bridging the digital divide through content analysis of internet web sites.

The research questions examined:

1. To what extent do the examined organizations work towards bridging the digital divide: Most of the organizations examined are working towards bridging the digital divide to a low-medium extent. An interesting finding is the fact that the positive elements which the organizations choose to focus on are: the technological gap and disparity. The negative element which the organizations did

not choose to focus on is the literacy issue, meaning, many organizations do not deal with teaching the ability to read and write, but relate to it as a basic need and preliminary capability for entering their program.

2. Is there a difference between organization types (local, international, and multi-international) concerning their activities towards bridging the digital divide: there was no obvious difference between local, international or multi-international organizations concerning their activities towards bridging the digital divide. However, there is a slight increase in the average of the international organizations. This increase can be explained by the fact that these organizations are able to advertise themselves better and wider than the other two due to their size and the financial and political support they gain. In addition, there was a little gap found between the organization's vision and their level of bridging the digital divide but it was not significant, meaning, all of the organizations state their vision of bridging the digital divide but do not really work for making it true. There was no obvious correlation between the organization type and bridging the digital divide, meaning that the activity towards bridging the digital divide is not substantially different between organizations.

3. Are there Partnerships between organizations and how do they come across: There are Partnerships between organizations. Most of them deal with financial support. Another interesting finding is that many organizations appear numerous times, as partners, as independent organizations or as financial supporters, meaning that many organizations, who claim they bridge the digital divide, are permanent, known and familiar with one another and are willing to help and support other organizations.

4. How do the teaching programs bridge the digital divide and evaluate users achievements in them: all teaching programs deal with education and creating a new and improved manpower for the 21st century. Most of them train people with the necessary technological skills needed for participating in the information age. The literacy factor was no found in any of the teaching programs selected in the research. Most of the teaching programs prefer to evaluate people's accomplishments by projects and practical exercises.

In order to perform this research, 50 organizations who claimed their vision is to bridge the digital divide were selected arbitrarily through the internet. The organizations were evaluated through a questioner which included the following

categories: objectives, target audience, activity and coverage, resources and partnerships, criticism and follow-up, general information and site description.

In conclusion, it can be seen that most of the organization sited who participated in the research did not bridge the digital divide in a high level, apparently due to the fact that they choose to focus on more superficial and defined issues such as technological problems instead of focusing on the real and profound issues of the digital divide such as the ability to read and write. International organizations advertise themselves as bridging the digital divide more successfully due to their financial and marketing capabilities, however, the activity of all organization types: local, international and multi-international is very similar. The lack of difference and versatility between the programs for bridging the digital divide can only indicate that the level of success in the organizations who deal with bridging the digital divide is actually low.

There is a tight and significant partnership between organizations. This finding strengthens the commitment for assistance and uniting forces shared by these organizations in order to solve the digital divide issue.

The teaching programs who were examined in the research deal with teaching technological skills for the information age and improving the quality of manpower in the 21st century. The users achievements are evaluated in a practical manner, which assures the fact that their training is practical and useful for the labor market.

It is possible to say that the picture is still optimistic. The digital divide is still bridgeable, it changes rapidly between populations, regions and the fields of interest. Most populations are not on the positive or negative side of the gap, they are spread in different places in between.

In case additional studies which will be performed on the subject, it will be possible to expand the research in order to receive a clearer picture of the organizations. It is also possible to perform the classification of organizations in division to countries and through that, be able to examine if there is a change in the quality of organizations and the resources they can offer their target audiences.

System No.

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