Why a Book on the Digital Divide in 2020?

Jan van Dijk. 2020. *The Digital Divide*.

Cambridge, UK: Polity, 208 pages

ISBN 978-1-509-53445-6

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A comprehensive approach to digital inequalities helps both researchers and practitioners to understand the widening gap between the haves and have-nots in today's information society. Jan van Dijk's book helps key stakeholders – students, scholars, policy makers, and the public at large – to evaluate the broader societal implications of being disconnected in so many ways.

Living in a hyperconnected world is an opportunity and a privilege for about a quarter of the world's users: the developed, urban, young, educated, and English speaking. In order to design effective strategies and policies aimed at bridging the gap between the privileged and the underprivileged communities, areas, social and professional categories, and age-groups, an evidence-based approach is needed.

While several voices have criticized a dichotomic approach to ICT-related engagement and affordability (Gunkel, 2003; Selwyn, 2004), a closer look at Jan van Dijk's work unfolds a nuanced view. Ellen Helspser's appreciation on the back cover of the book is relevant: "Building on existing research and new theoretical development, he shows that digital divides are changing shape and are likely getting worse. Anyone interested in why, what and who we should be worried about in increasingly digital societies has to read this book."

Although the term "digital inequalities" seems to be constantly gaining popularity (DiMaggio–Hargittai, 2001; Gilbert, 2010; Beaunoyer–Dupéré–Guitton, 2020), the "digital divide" is still a strong metaphor and a term that is here to stay (Barzilai-Nahon, 2006; Ragnedda, 2017; Vartanova–Gladkova, 2019). From infrastructural access and digital skills to usage patterns (van Deursen–van Dijk, 2010, 2014), the transformation of the digital space resulted in researchers focusing more and more on users and their specific needs, rather than on technology.

A Weberian perspective focused on digital capital (Ragnedda, 2017: 76), while looking at children and youth for a gradual digital inclusion (Livingstone–Helsper, 2007) is aimed at the problem-solving side of the digital inequality issue. Meanwhile a proactive, problem-solving approach to digital inequalities leads to the rising popularity of the term *digital inclusion* (Helsper, 2008; Seale–Draffan–Wald, 2010; Chadwick–Wesson, 2016). Answering the opening question of this review – why then a book on the digital divide in 2020? – the answer is blunt yet not simple: because it is still relevant.

The Book: Nine Chapters and a Comprehensive Language

The first chapter – What is the digital divide? – introduces key terms and the overall concept of the book. The author tackles misreadings of the term and criticism surrounding it. Van Dijk defines digital divide from four key perspectives: motivation, physical access, skills, and usage. Utilizing a metaphor to define digital inequalities has its own dangers, warns the author: firstly, that it is a simple division between social categories. Instead, we should rather imagine multidimensional fractures between various groups, along a wide range of socio-economic and cultural criteria. The second misunderstanding is conceptualizing divides as very long-lasting phenomena, as if carved in stone. In fact, these differences can be mitigated by smart policies on the local, regional, and national level. The third misconception is looking at digital divides in terms of absolute exclusion versus inclusion, and, last but not least, the term digital divide might suggest that it is a technological problem, when in fact it is a social problem of who, what, how, and why there is such a complex inequality between individuals, groups, countries, and regions.

Chapter two – *Research into the Theory of Digital Divide* – presents the key questions and themes tackled by social scientists, policy makers, and developers in the past 25 years, shifting from a technology-centred approach to a user-centred vision on how information and communication technologies (ICTs) have changed skills, attitudes, and lifestyles. In chapters three, four, five, and six, the author presents the framework of the digital divide theory: motivation and attitude (Chapter 3), physical access (Chapter 4), skills (Chapter 5), and usage inequality (Chapter 6). Chapter seven – *Outcomes* – frames the causes and consequences of digital media appropriation. Social inequalities have their complex expression in the field of digital inequalities, leading to disruption in terms of skills, and even more of usage, rather than access. The comprehensive highlights on positive and negative outcomes of digital media use are important for users, developers, educators, and decision makers alike: on the one hand, a fast and affordable

access to economic, political, cultural, and health resources via ICTs; on the other hand, excessive use, cybercrime, loss of security, and privacy.

Chapter eight – *Social and Digital Inequalities* – frames the multiple gaps between socially and digitally advantaged vs. disadvantaged categories and the connection between them. Social inequalities reinforce digital inequalities and user vulnerabilities: socio-economic status, education, residence, and age are predictors of such gaps.

Finally, chapter nine – *Solutions to Mitigate the Digital Divide* – wraps up the possible action steps for those in charge of ICT policies and social development plans. It is urgent and important to educate the workforce and to bring the benefits of digitalization in all areas of economic, social, and cultural activities. “The final direction of development is the full integration of all digital and social policies” (2020: 158) – concludes van Dijk.

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Cite as:

- Bakó, R. K. (2020). Why a Book on the Digital Divide in 2020? *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Communicatio* 7: 186–189. DOI: 10.2478/auscom-2020-0012.