Chapter 5

Why the Institutional Access Digital Divide Might Be More Significant than the Home Broadband Divide

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ABSTRACT

Digital-inclusion policy in the United States has historically emphasized home broadband access as both its policy priority and goal. Supplying households with broadband access may not do much to improve the ability of individuals to make meaningful use of the Internet, however, since it provides Internet access with little social context beyond the family. Drawing on Bourdieu’s concepts of disposition, habitus, and multiple forms of capital, this paper endeavors to situate Internet use in its broader social context and explores the importance of institutional access, Internet use at work or school, in developing the dispositions and competencies needed to use the Internet in instrumental ways, such as applying for educational programs or communicating with governments. Through descriptive statistics, it identifies which segments of a US city lack institutional access, and, using multivariate analysis, it highlights the role institutional access plays in developing these abilities and its role in further inequality.

INTRODUCTION

One of the long-running debates in research about the digital divide is what is more important, material access to the Internet or access to opportunities to gain the dispositions, knowledge, and competencies necessary to make meaningful use of the Internet. (van Dijk, 2005) In the 1990s, much of the discussion centered on what van Dijk (2005) terms “material access.” Later employment and educational opportunities were once routinely cited in concerns about inequali-
ties in Internet access, (Federal Communication Commission, 2010; DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001; National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 1995, 1998, 1999), but policy discussions in the United States today continue to emphasize broadband access to the home as both the primary policy solution and outcome.

This paper proposes to interrogate and problematize this current emphasis on home broadband access by examining the importance of the role of the context where an individual accesses the Internet. In some contexts, individuals have greater opportunities to acquire the dispositions and competencies used to make meaningful use of the Internet. Since President Clinton made good on a promise to wire every classroom in the United States, (Clinton, 1997) access to the Internet at school and in the workplace has received little attention even though jobs and education are typically cited as policy rationalizations for efforts to “bridge the digital divide” and broaden digital inclusion. As discussion of the digital divide moved past material access in the early 2000s, many scholars began to focus on potential computer and Internet users’ habits, including Bourdieu’s notion of a group habitus (Bourdieu 1984), acquisition of skills, aptitudes and attitudes (Van Dijk 2005) or dispositions (Bourdieu 1984). Many of these dispositions, habits, skills, aptitudes, and attitudes that enable people to take advantage of Internet access are acquired at institutional sites like school or work. This paper compares broadband access in the home to Internet access at institutional sites such as school and workplaces. It first identifies groups who may be excluded from full participation in the information society since they do not use the Internet in places where informational capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) is cultivated. It then compares the relative influence of social factors, including home broadband and institutional access, on the ability to make meaningful use of the Internet. It aims to make a step toward a full accounting of differences in access in US society. It also aims to examine the implications of differences in access for the acquisition of skills and habits that make access most useful and empowering through the concept of techno-capital, which extends Bourdieu’s notion of multiple forms of capital, particularly informational capital. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Brock, Kvasny, & Hales, 2010; Lentz et al., 2012; Rojas et al., 2012; J. Straubhaar, Tufecki, Rojas, & Spence, 2012)

As Internet use becomes an increasingly core part of life in the contemporary US and much of the informationalized West, (Castells, 2000) it becomes more important to situate Internet use in its broader social context, identifying how it permeates—or does not permeate—daily life for many of its users. This paper aims to further complicate binary formulations of access by comparing two broad categories of access, broadband access and access at institutional sites such as school and work. It uses results from a city-wide survey conducted in 2010 to see at what rates members of various demographic categories are able to access the Internet in these contexts. It then examines the influence of institutional access in cultivating the dispositions and competencies needed to make meaningful use of the Internet.

Internet Access and Social Inequality

Almost as soon as the Internet gained mainstream use in the 1990s, concerns were raised about how the Internet may aggravate existing social inequalities. These studies and reports suggested that groups already excluded from economic and educational opportunities would be further excluded because of the relative cost and complexity of Internet use. (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001; National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 1995, 1998, 1999) These studies tended to construct access in a binary fashion: individuals either had some form of access or they did not. After efforts to reach otherwise excluded individuals through community technology centers had mixed results, (Lentz et al., 2012;