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Digital Divide – Social Barriers On- and Offline

The current rush to put resources online is accepted as providing information and opportunity for learning and self-expression for all. Statistics suggest that differences across traditional categories of age, race, gender, and socioeconomic status are disappearing when gross indicators of 'having been online' are assessed. But such measures mask real differences due to language and technical literacy, usefulness and cultural relevance of resources, preferences and availability of technologies, and infrastructural support that makes being online practical rather than just possible. Research that looks beyond just 'being online' shows that some traditional categories persist but are expressed in different ways, e.g., in the amount of time spent online, and what content is of interest. Differences are evident according to experience online, which itself is correlated with when members of traditional categories came online. Differences in culture affect not only what content is of interest to users, but also norms for adoption and use of different technologies, and thus the critical mass of others with whom individuals can share knowledge and communicate via particular media. Regions vary in local infrastructural support such as electricity and wireless capabilities, typically privileging urban over rural users, and developed over developing countries.

Although these differences represent major markers in understanding the digital divide and social barriers to information access, they are only a starting place for understanding the range of issues affecting participation in online endeavors. Beyond classifications by traditional measures are differences in the new literacies, including facility with the primary language in which resources are presented, online language and communication norms, familiarity and experiences with various online technologies, and venues. Use and users differ in their comfort with exposing their thoughts and information on the web (and also with understanding the extent of that exposure), which is related to their familiarity and identity with the online environment, including knowing the norms of the local online group or community and other members of the community.

These many kinds of social barriers belie the notion of a digital divide, with its connotations of on or off, yes or no, one or zero access to the resources and benefits of contemporary information infrastructures. Indeed, digital inclusion and exclusion might be more correctly called a digital spectrum. This view is in agreement with others who have pointed out that the digital divide involves more than economic differences, an on- or not-online dichotomy, and online alone. This paper will describe and articulate this digital spectrum, with particular focus on its impact on information exchange, knowledge sharing, and formal and informal learning online.