

The Digital Divide

ALL WALKS SOCIOLOGY
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HIGHLIGHTS AND NOTES

Social Stratification

- Human history is littered with the ill-effects of social stratification,
 - otherwise known as “**Structured Social Inequality.**”
- Some forms of this inequality are as old as the hills.
 - Economic inequality taking the form of propertied classes versus (often racialized) working classes, slaves, the unemployed, and the poor.
 - Similarly, women have long been subjugated and exploited under Patriarchy.

Old wine in new bottles

- But structured social inequality can take more modern forms
 - and move stratification into new territory.
- The **Digital Divide** is one of the more recent twists in the history of inequality,
 - replicating old patterns of disadvantage and creating new ones.

What is the Digital Divide?

- It is the relative lack of **BANDWIDTH ACCESS** to the Internet,
 - humanity's largest and fastest growing compendium of knowledge, computing power and storage.
 - Where Bandwidth is: "The maximum amount of data transmitted over an internet connection in a given amount of time."
 - Bandwidth is typically calculated as megabits per second (Mbps).

What is the Digital Divide? (cont'd)

- So, a user's stand-alone computing power "under the hood" of their brand-new laptop is no longer the issue.
- What matters is their device's (smartphone to tablet to desktop) capacity to access an Internet provider's bandwidth connection to the Internet – and the user's ability to pay for that access.
- Because it's on the Internet that we find far more powerful Cloud Computing
 - delivering on-demand computing services, from applications to storage and processing power.

Who is on the wrong side of the Digital Divide?

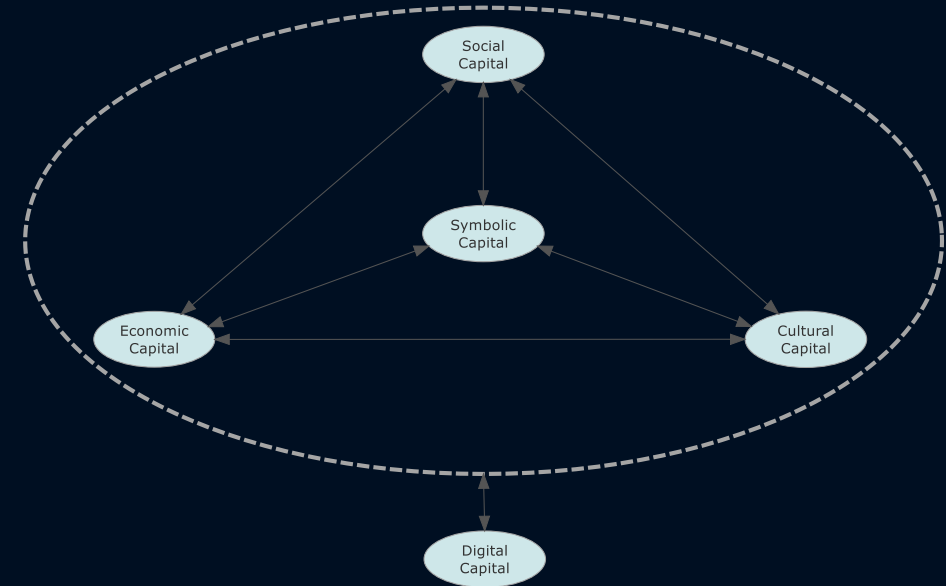
- Minority populations (a partial list in no particular order)
 - Indigenous, racialized, ethnic, immigrant, refugee peoples.
 - Poor people, including the working poor.
 - Disabled/differently-abled people.
 - LGBTQ(IA+) communities.
 - Rural and elderly folk.
 - People suffering from ill-health.
 - Student populations.
 - Global South countries (their governments and peoples).

What are the costs of being on the wrong side of the Digital Divide?

- Quite simply, substantial reductions in the accumulation of the following forms of **capital** (i.e., resources or “riches”)
 1. economic (material)
 2. social (relational)
 3. cultural (knowledge)
 4. symbolic (prestige)
- Note that increasing *symbolic capital* results from increasingly strong – and strongly inter-related – positions on the first three forms of capital.

Now, here's an interesting possibility!

- What if there's a new kid in town?
- That is, **a new form of capital!**
- Digital capital.
 - Remember bandwidth and the ability to access the resources of the Internet!
- And what if **possessing digital capital builds economic, social, cultural, and, ultimately symbolic capital – and vice versa?**
- Then we can begin to appreciate the critical importance of closing the gap on the Digital Divide.



So, how to build up Digital Capital?

- Since attractive bandwidth access tends to be expensive,
- and since the societal, common good outcomes are potentially so great,
- it seems incumbent upon every level of government, business, and voluntary association to adequately resource the building up of digital capital among those being left behind.

So, how to build up Digital Capital? (Cont'd)

- And here several jurisdictions around the world are focusing on upgrading local libraries and their portals – along with professional staff and volunteer corps – to meet the challenge.
 - Although university libraries, city halls, community, faith, and corporate physical or virtual locations might also serve well.
- Research shows that those marginalized are eager to embrace the new technology, despite some very real barriers.
- It's past time, then, for all sectors of society to prioritize and coordinate their efforts in modernizing and equitably distributing bandwidth access,
 - consequently making the Internet's substantial resources available to all.

Sources:

- Initial research revealed 28 promising sources, shortlisted to 9 (+1).
- <https://psu.pb.unizin.org/ist110/chapter/9-3-the-digital-divide/>
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_divide
- <https://www.ictworks.org/digital-divide-technology-access/>
- <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/full/10.1377/hlthaff.19.6.255>
- <https://www.internetworldstats.com/links10.htm>

Sources (Cont'd):

- <https://publicpolicy.wharton.upenn.edu/live/news/2420-bridging-the-digital-divide/for-students/blog/news>
- <https://www.wired.com/story/school-online-digital-divide-grows-greater/>
- <https://time.com/4718032/the-digital-divide/>
- <http://www.digitaldividecouncil.com/what-is-the-digital-divide/>
- This last resource is the inspiration for the discussion on slides 7 + 8:
- [Digital Capital: A Bourdieusian Perspective on the Digital Divide](#)