

∴ Experts on the "Digital Divide,"


∴ Framing the Digital Divide

The Means of Resistance: A Doctoral Student Proposes Three Ways to Combat the "Digital Divide"

by

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When I am not portraying my alias as a doctoral student in Social Science and Comparative Education here at UCLA, I can most often be found locked away in my bat cave of peripheral and software technologies, plying my trade as a designer for the World Wide Web. It is in this capacity that I have had some opportunity to witness the formation of the "Digital Divide," though I should point out that in my 15 years of being intensely involved with computers, I have no doubt experienced the Divide from a biased standpoint. That is, my place within the history of the Divide is privileged. It is in looking across the technological chasm that separates me from others, then, that I would like to offer a few ideas about the unfolding future of the "Digital Divide," as well as some possible means of resisting it.

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While the recent dot-bomb of so many companies in the technology sector has temporarily slowed the enthusiasm for all things computer, the evidence I look at from within the trade shows that this slowing trend will not last. In fact, Moore's Law is not being amended. New technologies and the demand for them will continue to increase over the next 5-10 years at a rapid rate. The reason for this is because the Web itself is in the process of achieving a major transformation. As you read this, the general nature of the Internet is moving from static, text-based to fluid, multimedia. With the corresponding growth in mid and broadband telecommunications domestically, and low-band communications globally, the marketplace of the Web will continue to evolve. By the decade's end, Bill Gates' dream of an interactive, virtual space will exist (for the few).

Practically speaking, I see two major elements within the Internet industry that lead to an increased social divide. The first is simply familiarity and skills. While there is a significant minority of the population who share my interests and skills (the growth of the Web demands it), large populations have not made computers, or the Internet, normative to their experience. Social perception can play a factor, though my experience is that this is less so amongst the young, who are quick to recognize the sophisticated levels of play and rebellion that computers afford. A bigger issue remains the sheer economics of the industry. Computers, the software to run them, and the Internet services to network them on the Web are priced like luxuries. Yes, prices have lowered on average each year. Yes, the industry would desperately love to encourage as many people as possible to become Net consumers. However, in an industry that remains driven by the fashion of

"the next new thing," and that markets, designs, and prices according to it, the luxury problem is not one that is abating. Moreover, it will not be any time soon.

But the simple fact remains that almost any program can be captured, reproduced to a blank CD, and proliferated easily and multiply. Again, one side of the divide has known and profited from this for some time. In determining counter-strategies I simply ask, "Why shouldn't the other side?"

Still, levels of micro-resistance can help communities in the fight against victimization by the "Digital Divide." Those with computer skills and knowing experience must volunteer their time to assist those without, and the programs that offer such training need publicity so that people are made to feel aware and welcome. Happily, I can attest to the fact that such programs work. And while the opposite is, no doubt, just as true, young computer professionals do have social consciences where their industry often does not. Even as these professionals are moving into urban areas, inflating the cost of living, and driving others out, there is a general value put on sharing knowledge and skills, and in keeping such activities free, or very low-cost.

Another possibility for resistance is through the charitable recycling of older systems. Again, computer systems are outmoded every year or two within the community of users. Some of this is due to fashion, but a larger part is simply because the standards for functional use are being evolved at a correlative rate. What happens to these older systems when they are past their prime? I know of hundreds of systems that are right now sitting stacked in closets. However, social programs do exist to charitably donate these unused peripherals to communities in need. And while such donations only go part of the way towards solving the real problem of how we allow communities equal access to co-evolve with this technology, these donations do allow new communities access to computer experiences, to develop values around the technology, and to form beginning computer skills.

A third way that the Divide may be combated on a micro-level is simply through the proliferation of software, the programs that make computers exciting. The industry would have the general consumer believe that one needs to buy expensive software packages to make computers truly functional. True, software packages available for purchase are often powerful, value-adding tools. However, in countering the Divide a couple strategies can be advised against, what I will call, the Microsofting of the society. One, countless areas on the WWW offer carefully reviewed and documented freeware (software available for free download and install), or shareware (software available for a small fee). Much of this shareware remains available via the honor system, in which the user is asked to pay for registration if they like the program and wish to use it.


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On the practical level, however, one does not necessarily have to pay anything whatsoever. Secondly, and this remains a common practice within the industry itself, the powerful commercial software packages can be acquired without thereby also acquiring their hefty associated fees. That is, they can be pirated. Yes, I have said it – and yes, it is technically illegal. But the simple fact remains that almost any program can be captured, reproduced to a blank CD, and proliferated easily and multiply. Again, one side of the divide has known and profited from this for some time. In determining counter-strategies I simply ask, "Why shouldn't the other side?"

In closing, I would like to offer one more way to combat the "Digital Divide," though I think its implementation is far less probable and its success rate probably negligible. Failing to be educated in information technology, despite the realities, need not be defined in the negative. If the divide is real between the communities who have and those who have not, and if this void space is only to widen, then I would argue that a more radical response must be invoked by the "have-nots" than the mere enactment of such measures I have stated. Unless this "void" is acknowledged and taken up creatively as a free space, a place to define one's counter identity as a community away from

industry's effect upon the economy, then all gains will only be partial and will never close the gap. Until communities that are lacking in skills, product, or industry opportunity can circle the problem theoretically, criticize it, and against it deploy their own technologies, the equation is not reciprocal.

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