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GLOBALIZATION, THE DIGITAL DIVIDE, AND BIG BUSINESS

Every society, regardless of scale and time, has and have had their own unique challenges. In today's contemporary society, the problems can involve ideologies, the environment, technologies, media, and many more aspects. Many of these issues are widely publicized and made to be political issues, yet there are a few pressing ones that are largely left out of the mind of the public. One of these is the impact of technology upon globalization, as well as the digital divide it leaves upon the periphery regions of the world. While the core countries get richer and benefit from their own creations, there is an ongoing cycle in the periphery areas of the world where access to technology limits opportunities, which in turn limits access to technologies. Although some may conclude that this makes the issue far too complex to devote investment in solving, it also makes sense that using the technology to bridge the cultural and economic gaps would allow for even greater investment in further issues than is possible at present. To do this however, one must analyze not only the divide, but also the reasons and powers behind it, before looking at how to solve it.

The contemporary world economy is a product of rampant global capitalism, and its expansion on a global scale. As a competitive system, corporations are constantly vying for new markets to exploit and spread to. A process of globalization is the only thing that can result from this expansion at least unless the system were to collapse upon itself. The current driving force of the ever increasing speed and spread of this system is the internet. It is one of the most important mechanisms for the transfer of not only scientific and academic knowledge, but also goods, capital, and information between transnational corporations. Without access to the services the internet affords, individuals and businesses lose any competitive edge they may have to get ahead. As a world society, one would think that providing as many minds with access to information and opportunity to better themselves and the world would be a high priority, but it often seems that this is not the case. Despite the fact that the Internet has been doubling in networks and users every year since 1990, most Internet users are still in the core regions. In mid-2005 approximately 1 billion people had internet access. "About 27 percent were in North America, and another 28 percent were in Europe. The rest were in Japan, Australia, and New Zealand, and in the fragmentary outposts of the fast world that are embedded within the larger metropolitan areas of the periphery and semiperiphery. Overall, more than

65 percent of all Internet traffic originates in, or is destined for, North America." (Knox & Marston, 77) This discrepancy goes against the fact that the population of North America pales somewhat in comparison with the rest of the world, and showcases the fact that the current 'globalization' process is still dominated by the United States.

Having such a large amount of power in the hands of a few makes little sense from a worldwide community perspective, so what is the basis behind this reality? While one may immediately draw the conclusion that american dominated corporations are simply attempting to keep themselves in power at the expense of others, and this may be an entirely relevant point, there are other aspects to consider. "In broad terms the culture propagated by the Internet is very much core-oriented. The Internet portends a global culture based on English as the universal world language, with a heavy emphasis on core-area cultural values, such as novelty, spectacle, fashionability, material consumption, and leisure." (Knox & Marston, 237) From a purely ideological standpoint, there are cultures and governments that would rather their citizens not have access to this core focused internet, even were the aid free or donated. In communist states such as China, information is a highly guarded item, and the democratic and decentralized flow of information the internet offers would be considered as a threat to their authority. Along with this idea of restricting access to the outside world's internet, businesses and organizations within these systems follow the same sets of ideals and limit the information they share from themselves. In doing this, the advantages of the internet are somewhat lost and the divide becomes less about access to the technology, and more about culture placing barriers to stop the spread and proliferation of access to the information via the technology. These cultural barriers are not simply one directional either. In addition to core values being blocked from entering these regions, local organizations generally do not seek to conform to core standards and provide access to their information in english or in great detail, making it hard for core users to understand or gather anything relevant back from these foreign cultures, and causing them to revert back to the flow of information between themselves. Like the access to technology limiting opportunity cycle, this issue is a cycle of limiting

information transfer and communication across cultures that is difficult to break without significant investment in a way to dramatically impact and change the system.

Therein lies the biggest challenge in bridging the digital divide. Even more so in today's economic climate, the investment and research required to try to solve the issue can seem monumental, especially when the fact is considered that a variety of documented attempts at implementing ICT and the like into poorer regions to improve their situations have faced unexpected issues and largely failed at accomplishing their goals. With no guaranteed success, many organizations simply find it safer to concentrate on what they know and doing that, rather than taking the risks required to achieve the benefits of dealing with the situation. Mark Warschauer outlines three projects in his journal *Reconceptualizing the Digital Divide*. The first being the "Hole In The Wall" project in New Dehli where minimally invasive kiosks were set up to provide technology to the neighbourhood's street children. However, this ended up having little effect due to a lack of instruction and planning. The second project was the "Information Age Town" competition in Ireland, where the town that received the greatest investment monetarily, but the least in terms of time (which can be argued as worth more than money in the contemporary fast paced economy) saw little improvement compared to the towns that were forced to plan more and accomplish greater improvements with less capital. The final example was in an Egyptian university, where American donations faced problems being implemented as the institution could not justify investing more in one department while skimping on others. All three of these examples showcased how simply throwing money or equipment at the problem does not solve it. Only upon investigating the local culture and society and implementing solutions tailored specifically to local issues can the gap be bridged. There is no single blanket solution that can be applied anywhere.

While capitalist forces may have driven the divide wider, and it may be in corporations' best interests to keep themselves on top by continuing to dominate others, at some point there will be no more room for expansion within the core, and only by investing in and bringing the periphery to a similar playing field as the core will there be opportunity for further advancement. Those that realize this first will reap the

primary rewards, but society as a whole can also benefit from more man and brainpower being able to be used towards solving other world issues. Ironically enough, the competitive nature of capitalism may be the only catalyst capable of developing a global commune with equal opportunities, albeit through a collection of many fragmented identities and groups all contributing and working through a global medium, each in their own important way. When technology advances to the point where anyone can access, for free, or at least very cheap, any information they desire, or communicate with anyone they need to, it will be the first step towards a united global identity. As every culture and region will have their own styles and implementations of this system tailored towards them however, individual identities will be far from irrelevant. Globalization is the great paradox. Making the world smaller and more unified, by breaking it into distinguishable and unique pieces. The democratic and decentralized nature of new media, oddly enough, is what makes the unification feasible.

References:

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