The Digital Divide

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

BOOK REVIEW

The Digital Divide, by Jan van Dijk, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2020, 208 pp., £17.99 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-509-534456

The Digital Divide, by Professor Jan van Dijk, aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the evolution of research on the digital divide in the last 25 years whilst also firmly concluding that the divide reinforces existing social inequalities and that it won't be addressed unless social inequalities are. This conclusion, developed in the last chapter and which comes also with suggestions on policy strategies to address the gap, benefits from the conceptually and historically detailed preceding chapters that outline the phases of adoption of digital media. It is an important contribution considering that research on the impact of digital technologies has gone from a deterministic optimism relying on trickle-down access in the late 1990s to the caution and recognition later on that there is no evidence that the gap is closing or that technologies are offering the expected transformational potential. It is an addition to other voices in academia which have also warned about ICTs exacerbating inequalities (Unwin, 2017; Zheng et al., 2018). The book is therefore a welcome resource for students and academics as a reference on the evolution of research on the digital divide since the mid-nineties. It is also an evidence-based call on the negative impact of the divide on social inequalities and a theoretical framework on how to research and strategise solutions for both academia and policy-makers.

The book is rich conceptually and provides frameworks and categorisations to explain every step of the digital media appropriation process. This approach gives the book a clear structure and logic and will be welcomed by those in search for analytical tools to guide their research. It can be helpful also to policy-makers looking for ways to devise strategies that address the digital divide. Indeed van Dijk already alerted in the earlier book, The Deepening Divide: Inequality in the Information Society, about the need for an elaborated framework and for more conceptual clarity (2005). The author has included tables that helpfully summarise concepts, perspectives and frameworks, though the book would have benefitted from a narrative alongside these tables that included more qualitative analysis and examples of the lived experiences of digital inequalities.

The historical perspective that the book brings on the digital divide, both theoretically and empirically, is skewed towards Western research and quantitative surveys. This is partly explained by the dominance of quantitative descriptive research by American and European academia on the digital divide since the early 2000s, as van Dijk's historical account shows. It is also partly explained by the author's use of 'surveys, experiments and analyses of official statistics' to test some of the normative conclusions of van Dijk's previous work (p.vi). The author argues that qualitative research on the digital divide has been 'relatively sparse' (p.21). Other academic perspectives on the digital divide from recent research conducted in diverse parts of the world and from different epistemological standpoints can be good companions to this book.

The book's first chapter is dedicated to clarifying concepts, such as the distinction between 'access' and 'use', and to unpacking the use and history of the term 'digital divide'. The second chapter provides a historical account of empirical and theoretical research on the digital divide since the mid-nineties. In this historical account, the author identifies the lack of a robust theory that includes both empirical statements and the appropriate methods to explore those.

Van Dijk's uses his own Resources and Appropriation theory to frame the book's premises and structure the chapters. This theory allows the author to incorporate a range of theoretical

perspectives, namely a behaviouralist acceptance of technology perspective, a materialist approach based on access to capital and resources, a socio-cultural perspective, and a relational view that accounts for the power relations associated to differences between categories, not individuals. Core chapters are organised according to the 'causes' of digital media appropriation or the 'four phases of access and use': motivation for or attitudes towards using digital media, physical conditions of access, digital skills and, finally, usage patterns.

After defining concepts and causes, subsequent chapters focus on the outcomes of media appropriation, such as benefits in the economic, social, cultural, political or personal domains or negative outcomes such as cyber-crime or loss of privacy. It is at this stage that the author presents a core theoretical insight: the 'feedback loop of reinforcement' (p. 97). This loop means that the resources available to a person or group influence digital media appropriation and its outcomes and that, in turn, these outcomes reinforce the resources available. Van Dijk concludes that digital use is not only not reducing social inequalities but increasing them, and this is particularly the case in the current information and network society, where more activities are information intense and where connections condition access to resources. This is why the digital divide will not be bridged unless social inequalities are addressed.

Before outlining solutions in the last chapter, Van Dijk explores the relationship between social and digital inequalities in greater depth drawing on critical sociology and class analysis. Van Dijk assigns and describes different levels of digital access and skills across social classes although this framework is largely supported on data from surveys in the Netherlands and the UK and might not directly apply to other contexts. The author's analysis of the relationship between the digital divide and social inequalities also takes into account trends in digital technologies. The rapid multiplication and evolution of technologies can mean the process of appropriation is recurrent, thus creating various opportunities for groups to be left behind. In addition, the increased technological interdependences in the Internet of Things means that the required digital skills are becoming more sophisticated and content related, needing of more strategic communication abilities rather than purely operational ones.

According to van Dijk, these 'content-related skills' are set to become one of the most important issues in trying to mitigate the digital divide. Yet, van Dijk also concludes that the digital divide will only be addressed if social inequalities are reduced and highlights the need to facilitate social mobility as one of the central strategies for policy-makers. The book offers a set of policy recommendations by sector (economic, technological, educational, etc.), geographical region, and for each of the stages of the digital appropriation process (motivations, access, skills, usage).

As the author states, this book elaborates on a framework and arguments already sketched in a more normative way in *The Deepening Divide: Inequality in the Information Society* (2005) but contributes with a stronger empirical background and the new 'inconvenient message' that the digital divide reinforces social inequalities (p.vi). It is aimed at an academic audience but offers pathways for solutions for policy-makers, particularly around public social provision. It does not go far in highlighting the interests behind these inequalities or questioning economic growth and productivity as a model. This is perhaps because van Dijk's framework encapsulates various theoretical perspectives and 25 years of research and, as the author says, research from a power relations or 'relational perspective' has not dominated the field (p.30). Research from diverse parts of the world and epistemological approaches, such as intersectional frameworks that look at the relationship between power relations and digital technologies (Noble & Tynes, 2016), critical post-colonial research or studies that take different normative views on how to define development and wellbeing (Sanya, 2013) can be good additions to the lessons that van Dijk's captures from the last 25 years of research on the digital divide.

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