What Is the Digital Divide?

The Digital Divide is traditionally defined as the gap between people with access to information technology, such as computers and the internet, and those who have limited or no access. The term was coined in the mid 1990s and originally referred to a gap in computer ownership between different groups. Today, as computer ownership becomes more widespread, the term refers principally to broadband internet access, but it can also be applied to the availability of support for information technology (IT) usage -- such as the support teachers need to acquire the skills needed to integrate information technology in their teaching.

Why is the Digital Divide a problem?

There are negative and far-reaching consequences to the Digital Divide. When citizens' access to the technology, resources and skills required to use IT is restricted, their ability to participate as "digital citizens" is also restricted.

**E-Democracy:** As computer-based democratic participation becomes more widespread, people without access to IT are denied the opportunity to vote. In the United States and many other developed countries, the internet is an important information dissemination tool for political candidates. People with limited access to the internet, therefore, cannot effectively access resources such as news websites and candidates' websites, which denies them access to a large amount of the information they need to participate knowledgeably in politics.

**Business:** Modern Western commerce is internet dependent. Andy Grove, the former chair of Intel, once remarked that "...by the mid-2000s, all companies will be Internet companies, or they won't be companies at all" (Source: Flew, Terry, *New Media: An Introduction*, Melbourne, Australia: Oxford University Press, 2008) His prophecy was quite accurate, at least in the developed world. Businesses are simply expected to have access to IT. So the countries and regions that are most affected by the Digital Divide are highly limited in their participation in world commerce, and this can have serious economic ramifications for those countries.

**Employment:** There is a significant relationship between possessing computer skills and attaining and maintaining employment. Gaps in IT knowledge are probably a causal factor for growing wage inequalities in the United States (Source: Norris, Daniel T, and Simone Conceicao, "Narrowing the Digital Divide in Low-Income, Urban Communities." *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 101 [Spring 2004]: 69-81.
**Education:** The Internet is a powerful learning tool, giving teachers and students access to millions of scholarly articles and multimedia educational resources, making communication between teachers and students quicker and easier, and connecting schools to one another so that they can share educational ideas and discuss current issues related to the school. This puts schools with limited access to IT at a serious disadvantage. In 2002, 99% of schools in the US had computers and internet connections, but this is not enough. The ratio of students to computers in high poverty schools remains much higher than in low poverty schools (Source: Valadez, James R., “Redefining the Digital Divide: Beyond Access to Computers and the Internet.” *The High School Journal* [Feb/Mar 2007]: 31-44), and even when schools do have computers, the teachers must be trained to use them and incorporate them into their teaching. For more information, see Teaching and the Digital Divide.

Who is most affected by the Digital Divide?

**USA:** Poverty and race are the two most significant factors in the digital divide. A 2002 study by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration indicated that in the United States, Whites and Asian Americans had more access to IT than Blacks and Latinos. Additionally, internet use at home is much more common for Whites and Asian Americans. Schools with students of high socioeconomic status averaged a ratio of 4.6 students per computer, while those with students of low socioeconomic status averaged 5.5 students per computer (Valadez 2007). According to 1990-2000 census data, the typical American computer user was: White, between the ages of 25 and 44, college educated, married, and with an annual household income of $75,000 or more (Norris & Conceicao 2004). These demographics are changing gradually, but there is still a yawning gap in IT access between the haves and the have-nots in the US. This unfortunate situation contributes to racial and social inequalities in the US for the above-mentioned reasons: democratic participation, business participation, employment, and education are all limited to certain groups of people due to their socioeconomic status.

**World:** Generally, the developing countries are at a disadvantage to the developed countries. Africans are especially affected by the digital divide. For more information, please see The Digital Divide Around the World.