Digital Divide Bridged? Review of: The Digital Divide: Facing a Crisis or Creating a Myth? Edited by Benjamin M. Compaine, MIT Press 2001.

The "digital divide" as defined by Compaine is "the perceived gap between those who have access to the latest information technologies and those who do not." If we are increasingly living in an "information age" or a "digital age", as many believe, then such a gap may constitute a severe economic and social handicap.

Alternative definitions additionally often refer to the ability to *use* these technologies, as this comprises not only *access* but also *basic knowledge and skills* ("21st-century literacy", as some call it), and appropriate *content*. Also, these definitions usually refer not to the *perception* of a gap but *to the gap itself*—which, despite Compaine's definition above, is what this book is about.

Compaine's book is part of the MIT Press Sourcebooks series and consists of a collection of texts that shaped the US discussion about the digital divide and its policy implications. It has five chapters. The first chapter presents abridged versions of two US National Telecommunications and Information Agency (NTIA) reports of 1995 and 1999. The first introduced the term "information 'have-nots'", the second popularized – with overwhelming success – the term 'digital divide'. The second chapter sets out to provide the historic context of the debate, including the state sponsored availability of access to the telephone network and the rapid spread of radio, TV and VCR. The relatively long period of time that it took to connect the majority of people to the telephone network can be explained by the fact that it is useful to people only if (a) at least some of their relevant communication partners are also connected and (b) they do not meet regularly, anyway. However, it may equally be explained by the low uptake of information *services* (as opposed to *goods*) by poor households especially given the recurring nature of the payments required to maintain subscriptions and the associated drops in subscriber numbers during recessions.

The editor follows the first line of argument and concludes "that the digital divide, though it may have existed at the moment of the surveys [of the NTIA], may well be transitory, responsive to classic market forces, and that government policy may be best focused on filling small niches, as opposed to massive programs." (103) This sets the stage for the third chapter "The Advocates: Raising the Stakes". This chapter presents a number of papers that view the divide as a problem that requires policy intervention. This includes news coverage of Bill Clinton's 2.3 billion initiative to bridge the digital divide, proposed in 2000. The fourth chapter contrasts the interventionist statements with three recent empirical studies that strengthen Compaine's thesis that the digital divide is closing, or already closed, through market forces and that there is thus no need for government programs and subsidies. The final chapter consists of three essays by Jorge Reina Schement, Adam Clayton Powell III and Compaine himself. The last two express the editor's views and policy message: "My policy recommendation: declare the war against the digital divide won and move on to issues with higher stakes. " (301) Only Schement follows the second line of argument (see above) and concludes that "policy makers should concern themselves with the diffusion of Internet services and seek policies to support its widespread availability. " (307)

To sum up the scientific debate, I find it useful to distinguish between three aspects, two of which are

empirical and one pragmatic: *Which groups* are *in what respect* divided – and *who should do what* about it? The mentioned groups are women, ethnic minorities, older people and people with low incomes. The respects are the "latest technologies" of a given time: computers, Internet access, and now broadband Internet access. Recommendations include: access provision in (public) schools, public Internet-booths or community centers, state-funded private equipment and training especially for children and their teachers, support for the development of content – but also letting the market do its job of delivering ever cheaper devices which are increasingly easy to use so that the currently perhaps unevenly distributed real opportunities to use these technologies become balanced in the near future. Indeed, in the US for example, women have already caught up in the use of computers and the Internet and blacks and Hispanics have higher than average connection rates (whereas Asian people have never been under represented in the first place). Thus, the most sensitive aspects – sex and race – of the US divide debate have vanished or are in the process of vanishing. However, what about the low income and the older people? Most people think that the lack of training and content are the main factors that keep older people from using the Internet. Also, many of them may simply not see any personal advantage of using this technology. For the younger and mid-aged groups, as shown in a recent study in Germany, hardware and connection costs are the most frequent reason to stay "offline". That this may change in the future is of little relevance to those who cannot afford it today and whose job opportunities may depend on this. Indeed, a policy relevant equity problem may well exist if the chances of success in school and of finding a good job are lower for people who (or whose parents) cannot afford the latest information technologies. Thus, the policy discussion in the book misses some important points. A further challenge is the dependency of the "21st century literacy" on traditional literacy. That is, existing inequalities arising from traditional literacy issues may well be compounded by new technologies. On the other hand the spread of new information technologies can improve literacy – via telelearning etc. The latter is the optimistic hope of Lloyd Morrisset (taken to be the father of the term "digital divide") as expressed in his foreword to this book.
In my opinion this book is of limited value. Most of the reprinted material is available online (for those who can use the Internet, of course), most of its interpretation is biased, important aspects are missing (e.g., global/ international issues), and the more fundamental, philosophical questions of the debate (what is education today, what is political and social inclusion, etc.) are not addressed at all.

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