

INTERDISCIPLINARY COMMUNICATION STUDIES

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# Digital Divides in Europe

Culture, Politics and the  
Western–Southern Divide

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Peter Lang

## Introduction

This book explores the Western-Southern divide in Europe as this is made up of individual cases of digital divides in the countries of Greece and Portugal, in the South, and in the United Kingdom (UK), in the West. It aims to reach beyond an examination of the economic, technological and infrastructural drivers of divides and, instead, to place divides in a socio-cultural and decision-making (i.e. policy and regulation) framework.

The advent and diffusion of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) mainly from the 1990s onwards have clearly changed the direction of the discussion about the future of society and development. Castells argues that ICTs will create a new culture, the culture of real virtuality: ‘... through the powerful influence of the new communication system, mediated by social interests, government policies, and business strategies, a new culture is emerging: the culture of real virtuality ...’ (2000: 358). However, from early on it became clear that the development of ICTs and the shaping of the information society would not take the same form in all contexts at the same speed and through the same processes (Arino and Llorens, 2008: 127). Today, it is broadly acknowledged that adoption disparities and anomalies exist in various contexts and take various forms. However, at this stage no one can be certain about the driving forces of such disparities and provide a general, complete and long-term explanatory framework of digital divides:

Are the differences mainly a result of economic considerations: does the take-up of certain ICTs reflect the fact that they are less expensive in one country and more expensive in another? Do differences exist because the technology was introduced in one country earlier than in another? Do they reflect some national policy initiative or regulation policies – which may in part come from the political stance of particular Governments (e.g. those of Margaret Thatcher vs. Tony Blair in the UK)? Does differential take-up reflect something about the nature of the country: the physical geography, the climate etc. Or is something else at work here, loosely referred to as ‘culture’ (Thomas et al., 2005: 13).

Digital divides have been a huge concern worldwide with regard to their aspects and dimensions, as well as to their causes and their effects on the various domains of social life. They have been broadly defined as 'the gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels with regard both to their opportunities to access information and communication technologies (ICTs) and to their use of the Internet for a wide variety of activities' (OECD, 2001a: 5). They have been strongly debated and have continuously evolved as technology and the socio-economic, cultural and political frameworks in which technology is formed and adopted also evolve.

Digital divides are considered critical aspects of the discussion of the technological, industrial and societal changes that lie at the core of the 'media revolution' (van Dijk, 1999) and the related 'rhetoric of revolution and crisis ... a rhetoric of competing utopian or dystopian visions ...' (Silverstone, 1996: 218). They are considered critical for the way people benefit from ICTs and for the consequent implications for social life (Giddens, 1994; Splichal, 1994; Toffler, 1983; Evans, 2004: 14–18), with ICTs spanning all areas of social life.

Although often referred to as 'the digital divide', this phenomenon has many facets; there are 'interlocking' divides (OECD, 2002a: 3). These 'interlocking' divides go beyond the access to and usage of technology, while their nature, scope and importance are evolving along with the social, economic and political conditions in which technology is designed, developed and consumed. However, in this book I do not tackle all the different facets of digital divides. Instead, I examine Internet adoption and specific aspects of it such as Internet use and quality of use, with the latter being measured, among others, by the 'frequency of use' indicator.

Initial debates about digital divides were more inclined to emphasise equipment and infrastructure inequalities and disparities between different population groups and regions, provoking early on a series of criticisms regarding the quantifiable and technological character of divides: '... so many "bits" – so much economic growth – are readily quantifiable, and thereby they alleviate analysts of the need to raise qualitative questions of meaning and value' (Webster, 1995: 29). Later on, new debates and concerns about digital divides seemed to highlight the importance not only of the qualitative traits of divides but also of the way they are to be contextualised in a broader socio-cultural framework. While initial research in the

field tended to stress the role of socio-demographic causes and effects (e.g. Angwin and Castaneda, 1998), an increasing volume of works examines the context and cause(s) of digital divides from a socio-cultural perspective and particularly in relation to people's needs and everyday experiences: 'everyday life changes to accommodate the various technologies penetrating it ... or, rather, does everyday life itself induce transformations in technological systems and artefacts?' (Bakardjieva, 2005: 82). Along these terms, reasonable theses such as Selwyn's suggestion (2004: 351–5) that social and cultural capital along with economic and technological assets are mediating factors that shape people's engagement with ICTs are developing a more complex and dynamic picture of how digital divides are socially contextualised.

From this perspective, an early qualitative study (Haddon, 1999a) in five European countries merely scratched the surface of the possible role of cultural differences in Internet use in the five countries under examination. Later on, the analysis of general population survey results between 2000 and 2006 in the USA by Robinson and Martin (2009) found that Internet users are more supportive of diverse and tolerant points of view in terms of alternative life styles and 'deviant' behaviours than non-users are. Internet users also express slightly more optimistic and sociable attitudes than non-users do. Although the correlation between social attitudes and amount of Internet use is not monotonic and the authors could not easily conclude any causal inferences, they argue that 'it seems likeliest that these are pre-existing differences that made the Internet an attractive new information technology for these users, rather than the effects of Internet use *per se*' (Robinson and Martin, 2009: 521). If this is the case, then one should take socio-cultural parameters into serious consideration when examining Internet adoption and the related aspects of digital inclusion or exclusion.

At the same time, scholars (Garnham, 1999; Couldry, 2007; Mansell, 2002) have operationalised Sen's (1992 & 1999) capability approach and indicated, although not directly, the importance of also exploring the role of decision-making to explain phenomena such as digital divides: '... it is the real availability of opportunities and the real achievement of functionings that matters' (Garnham, 1999: 121). The functioning and enablement of people's potential in the communication technology sector in particular is a widely expected policy priority as civic rights are considered to depend

greatly on a series of communications rights and services: ‘... media access, public service broadcasting, universal telephone service, trade and investment in global telecommunications, media education, and cultural identity’ (Calabrese and Burgelman, 1999: 2). This is to say that policy and regulation decisions are responsible for the technological and communication options offered to individuals, while socio-cultural frameworks determine people’s abilities and potential to make effective use of the new communication technologies available, thus leading one ‘... to distinguish between different potential uses of the media and the uses actually made and to ask why potentialities available are not actualized’ (Garnham, 1999: 122).

## The research framework

In this book, I develop both a bottom-up and top-down account of digital divides, exploring ordinary people’s insights into divides and linking them to the role policy-makers and regulators play through their decision-making strategies to boost and improve the information society. The decision to develop such an analytical framework was partly driven by the existence of research that examines the drivers of digital divides lying in the societal domain as opposed to those related to policy and regulation, as well as of research that limits its focus to economic and access to technology factors. Besides, and as explained later, the Western-Southern divide in Europe seems to pose many challenges concerning the role of society and politics in digital gaps and disparities in these two parts of Europe, with socio-cultural and policy trends appearing to play a significant role in how certain aspects of digital divides are evolving in the two regions.

In a way, I attempt to employ a broader research framework (Figure 1) whose elements bring social culture and decision-making together within the examination of digital divides. In the figure below, social culture is to be treated as influencing the political and regulatory status of affairs (Element A), with the latter responding and either sustaining or challenging the cultural grounds of social life (Element B) and thus people’s decisions to adopt ICTs such as the Internet.

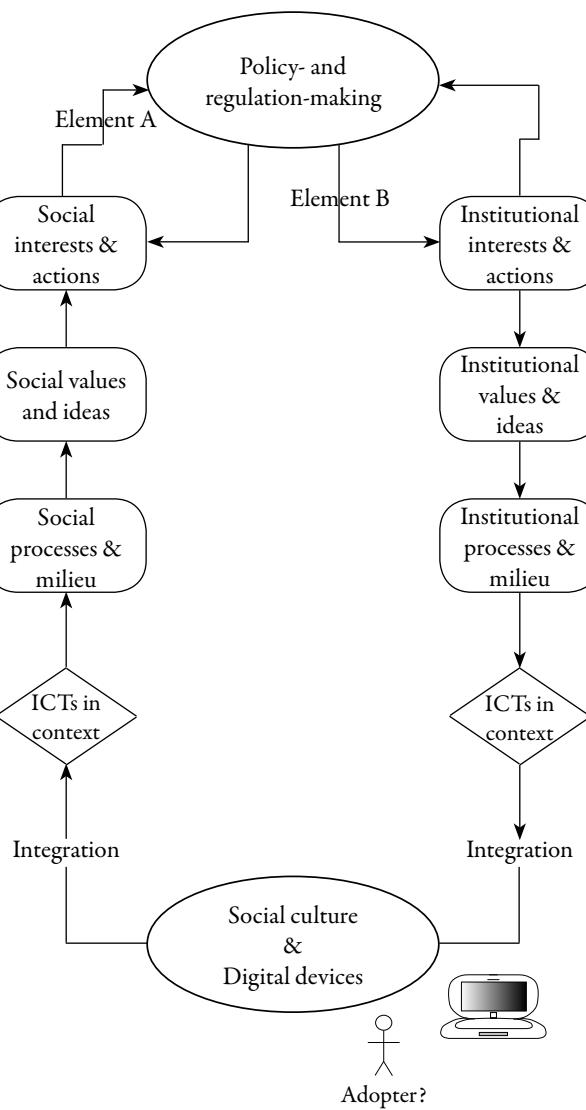


Figure 1 Research Framework

## Theoretical approach

The national contexts in which digital divides are found differ while the divides themselves evolve and acquire new meanings, requiring the further study of the nuances and factors underlying questions of access and use.

Theoretically, the book is structured around three perspectives. First, it draws upon Schutz's 'everyday lifeworld' and argues that digital divides should be explored by scrutinising the interactions of individual and systemic agent(s) in an everyday life framework and as part of a continuum of evolution over time. Second, it draws on Bauer's work on resistance to technology and argues in support of research to examine the driving forces behind technophobia and other forms of resistance. To complement these perspectives on socio-cultural forces, the importance of structural factors is recognised by drawing on policy and regulation and pointing out the need to examine policy and regulation practices within a complex socio-cultural context and with respect to their varying effects on the development and adoption of digital technology.

These theoretical perspectives enable the book to move beyond access and usage matters when exploring the 'why' and 'how' of digital divisions and to place the complex indicators of digital divides in context so as to explore them systematically. The book supports a theorisation of digital divides that emphasises the critical role of socio-cultural and decision-making dynamics in qualitatively and quantitatively structuring the adoption of digital technology. According to this theorisation, a complex set of social cultures with their gaps and disparities, as well as policy and regulatory mindsets and practices are in a constant dialogue with technology, influencing digital inclusion and participation.

In this way, the book is in a position to add to and critique some popular theorisations in the field, proposing alternative conceptualisations of digital divides and highlighting the interrelationships between the civic, political and other actors involved. This approach could provide the grounds for research to become better informed about other routes of investigation and for critically reviewing well-established and powerful

theoretical schemes in the field. Of course, I do not claim any significant addition to the conceptual *equipment* employed by key scholars in the field. My theoretical approach instead calls for an understanding of the complexity of interactions between concepts and notions that often appear in the digital divide research so as to enable the empirical testing of their role, such as the testing presented in Chapter 7.

## Conceptualising social culture and decision-making

Culture is a broad concept and constitutes a key object of analysis in cultural studies (Hall, 1980a & 1980b), the humanities (Hoggart, 1957), linguistics (Saussure, 1974; Levi-Strauss, 1968) as well as in sociology and Bourdieu's hierarchical view of culture as 'cultural capital' (1984). Hall (1980a: 63) defines culture as the meanings, values, lived traditions and practices of social groups and classes which are built on the basis of historical conditions and relationships and through which people's understanding of the world is expressed. Williams (1997: 6) highlights the evolving character of culture, calling culture 'ordinary' and defining it as the known meanings and directions to people as well as the new observations and meanings offered to and tested by people. In intercultural communication studies, E. Hall highlights the bonds between culture and communication and argues that 'culture is communication and communication is culture' (1959: 186). As regards social or civic culture, scholars have maintained that 'civic culture points to ... dispositions, practices, processes – that constitute pre-conditions for people's actual participation in the public sphere, in civil and political society' (Dahlgren, 2003: 154). With respect to the role of new media and communications, Castells argues that culture shapes and is shaped by ICTs, becoming a 'real virtuality' that influences society through 'cultural codes' (1998: 367). Researchers in the field have also attempted to define culture in a coherent, comprehensive and at the same time operationalisable way: 'some kind of commonly shared symbols, values, beliefs, and attitudes, and

their translation into everyday social perceptions, behaviour and material artefacts' (Thomas et al., 2005: 15). This definition points to the elements of values and ideas within an everyday framework that determine people's perceptions, habits, behaviours and the material organisation of their daily routine and practices.

Reflecting on the broadness of the notion of culture, this book attempts to tackle aspects of culture which are helpful for explaining the Western-Southern divide in Europe. It explores people's attitudes to new technologies and new developments in life more generally and their 'resistant culture' more specifically. On one hand, there are sociological approaches to technology that emphasise the settings of life and the related meanings, ideas, values and practices that matter for the adoption of media technologies (e.g. the work of Bakardjieva, Silverstone, Berker, Haddon, Hartmann and others). On the other, empirical studies (Bauer, 1993, 1994, 1995a & 1995b) and works on the history of technology (Mokyr, 1990 & 1992) examine ordinary people's attitudes to technology and instances of 'resistant culture'. For instance, regarding the Internet, in their typology of Internet non-users Wyatt et al. (2002) use the category of 'resisters'. However, a more detailed discussion of the notion of social culture and its elements influencing digital divides is offered in Chapter 2 of the book.

Parallel to the notion of social culture, this book examines the role of decision-making in digital divides. Decision-making consists of policy and regulation which differ significantly, although they are often used in the same framework. Policy is 'a coherent set of decisions with a common long-term objective (or objectives)' (ILRI, 1995: 3) and points to debates about the deconstruction of the legacy of the welfare state under the imperatives of liberty and independence (Calabrese, 1997: 20). Regulation represents the enforcement of policy decisions and visions by regulatory bodies through: (i) the presentation of rules and their subsequent enforcement usually by the state; (ii) any form of state intervention in the economic activity of social actors; or (iii) any form of social control initiated by a central actor such as the state and including all acts either intended to be regulatory or not. This last element is often seen as equivalent to governance (Baldwin et al., 1998). Regulation in media and communications is a blurry term and, although it impacts on how the market operates as well as on security and other conditions of technology use, its role remains invisible to the user.

This book takes a sociological approach to policy and regulation. First, critiques (Preston, 2003 & 2005; Silverstone, 2005; Mansell, 2002; Pauwels and Burgelman, 2003) of policy schemes in the information society inspire this study to account for the role of policy in digital divides with a concern for two issues: policy responsiveness to societal needs and requests, and the multi-layered influence of policy by visible or not cultural traits of society. Second, the Sociology of Regulation tradition (e.g. Braithwaite, Slater and Slater and others) looks at regulation's social accountability in various regulatory domains and feeds, albeit not directly, the discussion of Internet regulation and digital divides. In addition, works by the Centre for Analysis of Risk and Regulation (CARR)<sup>1</sup> touch upon dialogical and participative accountability mechanisms and the democratic responsiveness of regulation, going beyond technical regulatory regimes (e.g. Black, Hutter, Scott and others).

However, no specific policy and regulatory domains are explored in the book. Instead, the aim is to address the multi-dimensional role of policy and regulation in a flexible way. On one side, I am not interested in examining any specific domain of policy and regulation<sup>2</sup> as I approach their role in digital divides by looking generally at political mindsets and practices in the field. On the other, the source of original empirical knowledge is the discourse and perceptions of ordinary people rather than some objective survey or observation of actual policies and regulations. This research strategy can simultaneously illustrate that policy and regulation are the domains in which social culture is formalised, filtered and transformed through and into decision-making processes.

<sup>1</sup> For more information, see <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CARR/>

<sup>2</sup> Only the empirical part of the book, Chapter 7, tests the role of specific policy and regulatory issues in the digital divides in Greece, Portugal and the UK.

## Why the Western-Southern divide?

As discussed in detail in Chapter 3, it is commonly recognised that Europe<sup>3</sup> is marked by disparate rates of ICT adoption, with the Internet in particular having a strong regional dimension. In this regard, the best performers are mainly the Western and Northern European countries, whereas Southern European states, in particular Greece, Italy and Portugal, and most of the new European Union (EU) member states perform below the EU-27 average. The cross-national perspective on digital divides highlights, in this sense, the series of gaps and differences relative to the European information society and particularly with regard to the Western-Southern divide.<sup>4</sup>

Regarding the reasons Greece, Portugal and the UK were selected as the case studies of this book, the book's title itself indicates the rationale of the country selection strategy I have followed. The two countries from Southern Europe, Greece and Portugal, illustrate on the grounds of both their commonalities and differences the persistence of digital divides in the South and the socio-cultural and decision-making reasons to explain the gap vis-à-vis the West. The UK is selected as a 'typical' case of the West which politically and socio-economically evolved fairly smoothly in the post-war period, while enjoying fast and vigorous technological development. At the same time, the UK shows that culture and politics still matter for the development of digital technology in the West, although in completely different terms to those in which culture and politics influence development in the South. Nevertheless, a clearer picture of the particular weight and interest these three countries carry will be offered in Chapter 3 where an overview of the Western-Southern divide is provided, as well as in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 where digital divides in the individual countries are analysed in depth.

3 The broader geographical context of this book is the EU-27 area. Hence, nearly every use of the term 'Europe' is a reference to the EU-27 area.

4 An in-depth and rich discussion of such gaps and inequalities is offered in Chapter 3.

Due to the breadth of these three case studies, the book cannot offer an exhaustive analysis of the three national contexts and their various conditions which might be related to digital divides. Instead, the book focuses on the historical, socio-cultural and policy/regulatory conditions in each country which are important and relevant to the course of digital technology in the three national contexts. Thus, the analysis in the abovementioned chapters constitutes a selective and at the same time well-focused analysis of the three contexts so as to tackle the issue of digital divides both nationally and cross-nationally.

Hence, each national context is examined from its own unique perspective, while the book adopts a common conceptual framework that enables the disentangling of the variations in digital inequalities in the three countries through the employment of the same socio-cultural and policy/regulation parameters (see Chapter 2). It does so in order to understand all different people's decisions to adopt the Internet or not, as taken in different contexts, by accounting for their dispositions to and evaluations of the Internet and by linking this to what is often considered practice-oriented and problem-solving policies and regulations in the information society.

## Book outline

The book is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2. This chapter sets out the theoretical and conceptual framework of the work. It discusses the dominant discourses on digital divides and the two key concepts of social culture and decision-making. It looks at general socio-cultural accounts of technology and argues for the value of traditions addressing everyday life values and practices and of studies exploring cultures of resistance to technological artefacts. Then, it discusses policy and regulatory models and, from

a sociological perspective, reviews their approaches to the development of new technologies. The chapter concludes with a conceptual framework which supports the application of an innovative, two-way account of digital divides, highlighting the importance of social culture and policy/regulation in particular.

- Chapter 3. This chapter delineates the Western-Southern divide, positioning the phenomenon of digital divides in a European context. First, it overviews the European information society and its traits related to the course and divergent pictures of technological development in the West and South of Europe. Then, it illustrates the main aspects and dimensions of the Western-Southern digital divide, and introduces decision-making and social culture as potentially accountable parameters for the particular position of Greece, Portugal and the UK in the European information society.
- Chapters 4, 5 and 6. In order to contextualise the study in a better way, these three chapters provide a detailed account of the past and current status of digital divides in Greece, Portugal and the UK, respectively, and espouse a historical view of the factors driving the information society in these three national contexts. These chapters aim to provide sufficient justification of the interest in the three national case studies and to explain the way these case studies reflect the Western-Southern divide in Europe.
- Chapter 7. This chapter tests the thesis of the book by analysing the European Social Survey (ESS) data of 2008. It dives into an empirical examination of the role social culture and decision-making play in Internet adoption in each of the three countries under examination through a statistical analysis of the ESS data. It operationalises the conceptual framework set out in Chapter 2 by analysing social values and ideas as well as variables addressing the perceived efficiency and accountability of policies and regulations that correspond to how social culture and decision-making are framed in Chapter 2.

- Chapter 8. The book concludes with strong evidence in favour of a top-down and bottom-up account to explain digital divides in Europe and particularly the Western-Southern divide. It argues that such an account not only confirms the gap between the West and South of Europe but, perhaps more interestingly, it provides evidence that allows one to argue that the Western-Southern European divide is to be seen as a ladder of divides influenced by a complex set of socio-cultural and policy/regulatory factors: Greece is found at the bottom of the ladder; Portugal is in the middle of the ladder; and the UK is at the top of the ladder. Further, this chapter discusses the work's contribution and policy recommendations.