

Social Impacts of the Digital Divide

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Human societies are witnessing a rapid revolution in the development of the knowledge economy, particularly in the fields of communication, technology, and electronics. This competition and advancement in these fields have created disparities among nations, societies, and individuals. Industrialized nations that own and produce these technologies have the initiative to control, monitor, and direct them in ways that serve their interests and impose conditions for exporting this technology. On the other hand, there are importing countries that are consumers of this technology. Consequently, a gap exists in the ownership and control of this technology, which has become one of the fastest-growing and most rapidly developing sectors within the knowledge economy. Its presence has facilitated many tasks, accomplishing them with greater speed, less effort, and lower costs. Its economic value is now comparable to or even surpasses the economies of entire nations.

It is worth noting that this disparity in production, ownership, and control of technology by certain countries and companies has created what is referred to as the "digital divide." The International Telecommunication Union measures this divide through the Digital Inclusion Index (IDI), which is an instrument for monitoring the digital gap between developed and developing countries, as well as between nations within each group. This index consists of three main sub-indicators: (access, usage, and skills). The extent of this divide depends on the unequal access to technology and the extent to which individuals acquire scientific knowledge and technical skills in managing and using it. It also relates to the density of mobile and fixed-line phone subscribers, internet users, and the number of computers and electronic devices such as tablets.

Thus, competition for possessing this technology and keeping pace with countries in its usage has become an inescapable reality. This depends on how it is used and employed in managing life's activities and fostering development. Its role in supporting the advancement and growth of societies is significant, as it has become a tool that enhances mechanisms of power between the entities that own it and those that lack it. Furthermore, countries that possess this technology are now reasserting their presence, asserting themselves as dominant forces capable of controlling the destinies of others who lack it.

However, in this article, we will focus on the misuse of this technology and its employment for achieving negative personal objectives, leading to the emergence of social problems that negatively impact individuals within society.

In our Arab societies, and particularly in Iraq, we are still grappling with high illiteracy rates, alongside the social factors and pressures that contribute to a knowledge gap between two generations: the parents' generation and that of their children. Many parents today lack basic knowledge and familiarity with information and communication technology, while many children possess considerable abilities to use and manage these technologies to serve their interests. However, some have found in this technology a means to prey on their victims, establishing virtual relationships with ambiguous virtual communities whose members share their views and seek to achieve their goals. These relationships have led to the emergence of various social problems and deviations, with many crimes committed as a result.

The Iraqi courts recorded 2,452 complaints filed before investigative courts regarding the crime of cyber extortion between January 2, 2022, and March 31, 2022. This noticeable increase in the number of such crimes clearly indicates a growing threat to the social fabric under a new form of crime that jeopardizes the community's value system due to the misuse of information and communication technology and social media platforms.

One sociologist expressed the expansion and dominance of globalization through information and communication technology by stating, "The dialectical relationship is that social media is a result of social disintegration, not the reverse. In liquid modernity, power must flow freely and be supported by dense networks of social relationships, particularly those based on land and borders, which must be eliminated. This is because the fragility of social ties allows the power of globalization to operate, sometimes in a soft invasion and at other times in a harsh one."

This technology has created virtual social spaces that allow information and data to flow at unprecedented speeds with just a click of a button, whether positive or negative, and these are marketed to consumers in virtual communities driven by electronic interaction. It is a process of commodifying speech: everything that happens on social platforms, whether through likes, comments, shares, or views, is commodified and generates income

for content creators, regardless of whether the content is immoral, obscene, or leads to extortion and threats against others.

Due to this digital divide, a space and freedom have emerged that facilitate individuals in committing crimes without the supervision of families, societies, or even security forces, owing to the high level of technical skills and knowledge required to commit these crimes.

In the realm of crime, many studies have confirmed the relationship between ignorance and crime. However, with the rapid technological advancement, some crimes now require a higher level of knowledge and advanced skills to commit, such as cybercrimes and cyber extortion. These crimes have diversified and increased due to the widening digital gap, allowing those who possess these abilities to exploit those who lack them. New forms of crime have emerged, including cyber terrorism, where groups with advanced skills use the internet to intimidate governments and individuals, forcing them to comply with their demands. Other types of crime include electronic forgery, hacking websites, and attacking young people through inappropriate exposure, defamation, manipulation of data, illicit trade, financial crimes, and cyber smuggling, as well as accessing private websites and pages to extort, defame, and manipulate others.

Moreover, the development and integration of information technology and financial services have caused societies to rely heavily on these services to manage their affairs, leading to an increase in cyber fraud crimes. Among the most targeted electronic and banking services are credit cards, payment cards, and other forms of hacking and piracy.

Cybercrimes possess distinguishing characteristics compared to traditional crimes, such as having no geographical boundaries, meaning they can be committed in any country. Additionally, perpetrators of cybercrimes leave no physical evidence at the crime scene since they deal with digital assets, data, and personal information of the victim. Furthermore, the digital crime environment is virtual, and there is no social stigma associated with these crimes, as is the case with some other offenses.

Therefore, it is essential to develop scientific and educational mechanisms to reduce the digital divide between children and their parents. Legal measures must also be put in place to curb the spread of these crimes and deviations, and efforts should focus on educating society on how to deal with cyber extortion and other forms of cybercrime in ways that limit their spread and growth.