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Implications of Social Inequality in Internet Usage for Educational Policies and Programs

It is clearly the case that access of young people to new technologies, including the internet, is unequally distributed. This fact has been the cause of considerable policy angst about the reduced educational and life opportunities of the young people who are on the wrong side of the 'digital divide'. It is generally assumed that they are condemned to being 'information-poor' in a knowledge society in which life chances are dependant on being 'information-rich'. This area of policy concern, in which issues of human capital, global competition, and social and educational equity are intermingled, has resulted in high-cost, high-profile educational policy initiatives in most western countries.

This paper is concerned with the relationship between information and communication technologies (ICT) and equity. I draw upon a study of families and their engagement with ICT in order to argue that the so-called 'digital divide' is an inaccurate and, in social policy terms, dangerously misleading concept that disguises more fundamental social divisions that no amount of access to new technologies, in itself, will redress. Indeed, the starting point for the paper is the sentiment expressed some years ago by Lipkin, who wrote of new technologies:

'Them that has, gets * If a particular race, sex or economic group occupies an inferior position in society, you only have to be able to add one and one to see that technology will compound the problem'. (Lipkin, cited in Zakariya 1984, p.29)

In other words, although differential access to new technologies does contribute to social inequality, it does so in ways that intersect with other forms of inequity and social division. 'Old' inequalities persist in the increasingly networked society, but they are not simply added to by technology. The study of four families reported in the paper indicates that ICT are incorporated into the lifeworlds of family members in different ways and are appropriated into sets of social behaviours and cultural norms. In effect, the case studies show that particular kinds of access and uses of new technologies compound existing processes of 'advantaging' within particular social and economic milieux, and that these processes of 'advantaging' need to be read and understood in order to understand parallel processes of 'disadvantaging'.

The policy implications of this conclusion are discussed in the paper.