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Journal of the Association for Information Systems
SPECIAL ISSUE

Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the 'Digital Divide'

Part II: Sociological Perspectives

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The lead article in the *Journal of the Association for Information Systems* in December 2005, "The Digital Divide: Current and Future Research Directions," by Sanjeev Dewan and Fred Riggins, explored a variety of interdisciplinary directions for research on the digital divide. Different academic disciplines are able to shed light on similar phenomena in differing ways, and so the benefits associated with bringing people together who have diverse research and scientific perspectives is often very high. In this second special issue of the *Journal of the Association for Information Systems* with interdisciplinary perspectives on the digital divide, special issue co-editors, Sanjeev Dewan of the University of California at Irvine and Fred Riggins of the University of Minnesota, have brought together three interesting papers that explore issues that reflect the natural research perspectives of the sociology discipline. "Part II: Sociological Perspectives," as the title suggests, offers a contrasting perspective to that discussed in the "Part I: Economic Perspectives" issue in December 2005. This issue presents research on the structural similarities of developed and developing nations as a means to estimate their capacity for Internet access and use, the drivers of public computer use for e-commerce transactions, and the potential of users' spelling and typographical errors to hinder their effectiveness when online.

The first article is by Edward M. Crenshaw and Kristopher K. Robison, sociologists at Ohio State University, entitled "Jump-Starting the Internet Revolution: How Structural Conduciveness and Global Connections Help Diffuse the Internet." The authors examine the key drivers of diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) during the period 1985 to 2000. According to the authors, *structural conduciveness* is reflected in "the similarities between developed and developing countries in economic, political and social structures," and can be measured by teledensity, service economies, political openness, and global urban share. The authors further define *globalization* in terms of foreign aid and investment shares, and tourism and trade shares. They argue that the structural conduciveness and globalization of countries predisposes them to be faster or slower diffusers of IT. The development of

new empirical results based on their sociological and political economy perspectives provides important input for policy formulation. This is because governments and many international observers have come to recognize the role that the Internet and electronic commerce can play in fostering economic growth and beneficial social transformation.

For those of us who take for granted our everyday access to computers and the Internet for communications, information, and e-commerce, the second article of this special issue offers an especially revealing point of view. The authors, Ann Rensel, June Abbas, and Raghav Rao of the State University of New York at Buffalo present new theory-building research from an information science perspective. Their article, "Private Transactions in Public Places: An Exploration of the Impact of the Computer Environment on Public Transactional Web Site Use," explores what happens when people who don't have private Internet access in their homes use public access computers in public libraries. The authors extend a variant of the theory of reasoned action that emphasizes *facilitating conditions* to determine the extent to which publicly-available computer users are willing to conduct mercantile exchange transactions in e-commerce. They point to a blend of physical facilitating conditions and virtual facilitating conditions as being potentially important. *Physical facilitating conditions* include task privacy and the availability of assistance in the use environment. *Virtual facilitating conditions*, in contrast, comprise user perceptions about keystroke and Web site access and activity tracking, the degree to which access can be achieved anonymously, and other individual needs for privacy. The authors' empirical research design also permits a careful and fruitful exploration of the extent to which the need for the individual privacy variable moderates the other hypothesized facilitating conditions for e-commerce transactional use.

The final article of this special issue is "Hurdles to Information Seeking: Spelling and Typographical Mistakes during Users' Online Behavior," by communications specialist Eszter Hargittai of Northwestern University. She argues that it is not sufficient to understand access to the Internet as the primary determinant of the extent of the digital divide. Instead, she suggests that individual user behavior on the Internet is also a bellwether indicator of the effectiveness of access and the quality of information foraging activities. This is important because much of the information that people seek out on the Internet requires filling out forms and identifying key words for search. When users are not able to effectively provide search-related information this way, it stands to reason that their searches will not yield the hoped-for high quality results and access to critical information. The author finds that the key driver of typographical mistakes is education level.

I am indebted to the special issue co-editors, Sanjeev Dewan and Fred Riggins, for their work on this and the December 2005 special issues of *JAIS* on the digital divide, as well as the joint MISRC/CRITO Research Symposium on the Digital Divide that was held at the University of Minnesota in August 2004. I hope that, through the ongoing research dialogue and our readers' consideration of the ideas that have been presented, we can establish a new common interdisciplinary ground for collaborative investigation and research into the critical issues surrounding the management and policy implications of the digital divide. In closing, and on behalf of Sanjeev, Fred and the group of authors and reviewers with whom they worked, I would like to thank Sirkka Jarvenpaa of the University of Texas at Austin and Kalle Lyytinen and Yusun Jung of Case Western Reserve University for the guidance and support that they gave our efforts from start to finish.

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