

ICT creating another social divide

The days when we were depending only on books, newspapers and the radio for information are long gone. Today, we live in a world of omnipresent, instantaneous and relatively cheap computer and internet-based communication. With new media (the computer, cell phone, internet, skype, apps (to name but a few))very widely available globally, we literally have information at our fingertips. We therefore are talking about living in the information and knowledge societies in which Information Communications Technology (ICT) dominates.

Technical innovations in communications technology are potentially powerful tools for advancing economic and social development by creating new types of economic activity, employment opportunities, improvements in health-care delivery and other services, and the improvement of networking, participation, advocacy even for entertainment. In addition, ICT can be used to improve interaction between governments and citizens, promoting transparency and accountability in governance. A good example of how these technologies could be used in this area, is the SMS pages in some of our local newspapers. However, even in Namibia where most people have at least a cell phone, not everyone benefits from or they do not benefit equally from

these technological advances. This is sometimes referred to as the “digital divide.” The digital divide – just like any other social divide (sexism, racism, classism, etc) - is a term that describes the inequality that exists between people based on their access, use and knowledge of ICT.

Looking at it from a Namibian perspective, It is fairly clear that there is a digital divide between developed and developing countries. What is perhaps not so clear, is that there are other gaps in this divide. These gaps include for instance a language divide (most of the information on the world-wide web is in English,) there is a class divide (poor people find it difficult to for instance buy computers or electricity to run and charge cell phones) and then there is the gender divide. This means that women and girls generally have less access to information than boys and men do. This gender divide does not only occur in poor countries, it also holds truth in developed countries. This is perhaps ironic given the considerable potential to use ICT to promote gender equality in society.

While we can clearly recognize the potential of ICT as a tool for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women, it also has considerable potential to promote or



even create new forms of gender inequality. As the “gender divide” grows, fewer women are accessing and using ICT compared with men and women often are discouraged from participating and benefitting from ICT by posting of materials that women find offensive.

An example of this is BitTorrent which is a very efficient and decentralised way of downloading and sharing large files. These BitTorrent tracking sites typically are tapping into the most misogynistic male fantasies and are filled with pornographic advertising in which women are debased or totally objectified or they are sex or online-dating sites directed at young heterosexual men.

Offensive ads are only a fraction of the intentional and unintentional barriers intended to keep women on the wrong side of the gender divide. These strategies systematically exclude women from and create barriers for women to enter and participate in the techno-geek culture. The spaces that are created in ICT often are so undesirable to women that they either do not want be in to, or they are not given the opportunity to participate in them. This may account for why only about 3 % of open source programmers are women, why only about 13% of Wikipedia contributors are women – This in spite of the fact that women are interested in ICT.

(see <http://bitchmagazine.org/post/mad-world-no-girls-allowed-file-sharing-culture-and-bittorrent>)

By Laura Sasman



www.afterellen.com

Women in Tech Fast Facts

- 2% of open source developers are women.
- Women account for 28% of the workforce in proprietary software.
- Women who earn B.S. degrees in Computer Science: 28%
- Women who go on to get PhD: 16.5%
- Women who held professional positions in the IT industry in 2006: 26%
- Age of first computer use: Female: 14.5 Male: 12
- Age of first computer possession: Female: 19 Male: 15

Sources:

Anita Borg Institute, 2007

FLOSSPOLS, 2004-2006

2005 O'Reilly Open Source Convention