

mDignity in the Global Village: Reflections on the Digital Divide, Capabilities, and New Information Technologies

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Abstract

How can ethics of information and communication technologies (ICTs) contribute to understanding and coping with the global digital divide? Several authors have suggested that we could use the capability approach (CA) to understand and evaluate ICTS (e.g. Johnstone 2007; Coeckelbergh 2010, 2011, 2012). Developing suggestions in the literature that the CA can helpfully address the problem of the global digital divide, this paper argues that (1) the CA enables us to move beyond the view that we must ensure 'access' to ICTs or that we must give people the abstract 'right to communication': as a normative theory of justice, it demands that ICTs be used to empower people who are on the 'wrong' side of the divide, that we ensure that their capabilities and functionings are enhanced by means of the new technologies. Responding to on-going discussions about information technology and the digital divide (e.g. Grodzinsky and Tavani 2007; Canellopooulou-Botti and Himma 2008) and taking into account new information about the use of ICTs in so-called developing countries, the paper further argues that (2) the divide may diminish due to the increasing availability of mobile technologies in developing countries (see the recent UNDP report, Zambrano and Seward 2012) and that, in so far there is still a gap, (3) this gap can only be adequately addressed by the CA if it recognizes that ICTs are not mere tools (means), but are changing the very meaning of human capabilities and indeed of human dignity (ends). The paper concludes that if in order to function and flourish as a human being in this global world we need the ICTs of our time, then making sure that all people participate in and benefit from the effective, skilful and meaningful use of new ICTs (including mobile technologies) is a direct, not indirect demand of justice.