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Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty and the Internet Worldwide [Review]

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Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty and the Internet Worldwide [Review]

Description
Pippa Norris, *Digital Divide*

Posted on **October 1, 2001** by **Editor**

**A Review**

*Civic Engagement, Information Poverty and the Internet Worldwide. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, October, 2001,*

Review by **Drew Harrington** <harrington@pacificu.edu>
University Librarian, Pacific University

Political scientist Pippa Norris is Associate Director (Research) at the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University, and she lectures at the John F. Kennedy School of Government. Norris has published more than 20 books and has authored more than 100 articles on comparative political behavior. Her latest book, seeded by numerous theories about the democratic potential of new information technology, examines the digital divide and electronic political activism. Norris divides Internet soothsayers into three categories; “cyber-optimists” who believe that the new technology will shrink society’s gaps in power and influence, “cyber-skeptics” who predict that societal divides will stay much the same as they are and have been, and “cyber-pessimists” who suggest that Internet technology will actually widen the gaps.

Based on her own keen insight, and on case studies of online civic engagement as well as data on Internet access and use from 179 countries, Norris suggests that the digital divide is about more than rich vs. poor. She identifies a “global divide” evident between developing countries and industrialized nations, a familiar “social divide” between the haves and have-nots within each nation, and a “democratic divide” that splits those who do and do not use Internet resources to engage in public life.

The global divide is based on disparity, from country to country, in access to information technology. Currently this divide is widening, but Norris acknowledges that over time the gap is likely to shrink as in the case of older communication technologies—telephone, radio, and television.

The social divide, as always, is about income, education, class, gender and race. Norris tends to be a cyber-skeptic when considering the social divide, arguing that the Internet reflects and
thereby reinforces, rather than transforms, society.

Norris is most interested in the democratic divide, where motivation is the chief component. She notes that those who are already interested in civic engagement in other mediums will likely include the Internet in their efforts or transfer to Internet-based political activism. But, “the Internet will not change the disengaged to the engaged,” she says.

Norris’ writing is engaging and well informed as she seeks to understand the root causes and consequences of inequalities in this first decade of the Internet age.

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