Chapter 12

New forms of the digital divide

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The article discusses the inequalities that emerged in parallel with, and as a result of, the rise of digital media across the world. The analysis of theoretical approaches to the digital divide in both global and national contexts proves that digital inequality is a multi-faceted issue that has been developing over the course of time and is noticeably affected by the changing realities of digital media today. The article broadens the discussion by adding the issue of multi-ethnicity to the theoretical context, looking at the digital divide in a national context, in this case Russia. The paper focuses on the empirical dimensions of digital inequality on a country-wide level, analysing the issue of the digital divide as both a theoretical and a practical phenomenon. Consequently, possible ways to overcome and to prevent the digital divide are discussed, with a focus on media policy and digital engagement through media literacy playing a crucial role in this process.

Contemporary society has considerably increased its dependence on information and communication technologies (ICT) and digital media, which are gradually shaping modern social and individual life. The process of digitalization has influenced almost all social practices and individual experiences. Politicians and academics have widely discussed how digital technologies could contribute to the digital economy, democracy and empowerment (Castells, 1996, 2009; Dahlberg, 2015; Norris, 2001). However, in parallel with a belief in the advantages of digitalization, there traditionally exists a critical approach to the progress of digital media that draws attention to controversial issues of digital realities, such as information security in business and the media, public and private domains, network surveillance, information abundance, the rise of digital consumption and so on (Athique, 2013; Lindgren, 2017).

Describing future society as "information", "knowledge", "networked", "network" or "digital" (Castells, 2001; De Prato et al., 2014; Webster, 2006), scholars have relied on the perception that the future will be shaped by digital economy, democracy and culture under the strong influence of information and communication technologies (ICTs). At the same time, scholars have also pointed to the growing digital gaps

Vartanova, Elena & Gladkova, Anna (2019). New forms of the digital divide in Josef Trappel (ed.) *Digital media inequalities: Policies against divides, distrust and discrimination*, pp. 193-213. Göteborg: Nordicom.

between and within regions, countries, nations and individuals – also the result of digitalization.

The continuing and even deepening social injustice, reflected in a high number of global, social and individual forms of inequality in a digital society, has become one of the most widely debated problems in media and communication studies (Ragnedda & Muschert, 2013; van Dijk, 2005). The digital divide itself has often been considered as a global problem of unequal access to and unequal use of digital technologies, with special attention paid to the benefits of using digital technologies and the disadvantages of not doing so (Fuchs & Novak, 2008; Park, 2017).

A theoretical understanding of digital inequality as a multidimensional and complex phenomenon could hardly cover all the possible empirical representations of it, from basic technological access to the digital competences of social institutions and individuals (Park, 2017). The development of academic views on the digital divide can thus be described as a continuum of related issues, starting with unequal access to digital technologies, a lack of resources and skills and low motivation to use the technologies and extending to a lack of opportunities to use new digital tools and platforms for social purposes (Lindgren, 2017). In academic studies, the digital divide has often been considered as a new and multifaceted type of social inequality.

Theorizing the digital divide

The study of the digital divide as a new form of social exclusion recently became an emerging and popular area of media and ICT studies. According to meta-research on academic articles regarding the digital divide conducted by a Canadian scholar, Bhanu Bhakta Acharya, the number of such publications had reached more than 14,000 by the end of the twentieth century (Acharya, 2017: 46). The interest increased in the 2000s, and two main groups of academic studies with a clear sociological focus can now be identified. The first one analyses the qualitative growth of ICTs and emphasizes emerging digital gaps from a vertical perspective; the second one adopts a horizontal perspective, paying attention to national and global inequalities (ibid.: 47).

The study of the digital divide is rooted in early predictions of social inequality in the information society. Initially, information poverty, measured through uneven access to ICTs and the network infrastructure, drew attention from scholars worldwide (Compaine, 2001). In fact, uneven access to technological networks and infrastructure, resulting in unequal access to the information and online services that they distribute, shaped the first period of the digital divide studies (van Dijk, 2013). Obviously, the first stage of the digital divide research was marked by a clear political economy approach. For instance, Pippa Norris (2001: 13) referred to ICTs as "a Pandora's box unleashing new inequalities of power and wealth, reinforcing deeper divisions between information rich and poor, the tuned-in and the tuned-out, the activists and disengaged".

Over the course of time, the digital divide became understood not merely as an access problem but as a complex multidisciplinary phenomenon closely affiliated with the political, economic and cultural development of a society. Scholars underlined that, given the multiple aspects of society's life to consider, "there is more than one digital divide" and stressed that the view of the digital divide as a binary distinction between haves and have-nots is not appropriate (Compaine, 2001: 25). Scholars understood the complexity of the issue and argued that "digital inequality should not be only the preserve of specialists but should make its way into the work of social scientists concerned with a broad range of outcomes connected to life chances and life trajectories" (Robinson et al., 2015: 570). The digital divide has attracted the attention of scholars from various research fields, including sociology, political and economy studies, anthropology and so on (Compaine, 2001).

Thus, the second wave of the digital divide studies put forward a more nuanced, up-to-date approach, looking at the problem as a multidimensional issue, embracing different aspects of the divide and exclusions and approving the applicability of conceptual dimensions – from political economy to lifestyle studies (Ragnedda & Muschert, 2013). Scholars drew attention to the digital equality in general as well as to the inclusion problem as a precondition for the future development of the society, communities and individuals (Castells, 1996). The problem originated in the traditional political economy's concern about users' access to new recourses of the digital society; computers, telecommunication networks and information as well as content distributed via these networks. Later on, it developed into a broad, multifaceted field of study, which implied various dimensions that may be examined only through a multidisciplinary approach.

It is worth noting that unequal access to digital technologies and media, as well as an early understanding of digital inequality, promoted the concept of "digital inclusion" as an alternative to the digital divide as digital exclusion. At the beginning, it already became clear that policies seeking to bridge the existing digital inequalities should be targeted at building digital inclusion – in technological, economic and usage forms. At the same time, it was clear that the technological gaps were to a large extent determined "by the societal and cultural norms of the existing society, and there has been a long historical trajectory of how the human race has embraced and advanced technologies over the time" (Park, 2017: 6).

Thus, the second stage in the study of digital inequality focused on its impact on the social life of modern society, using methodologies and instruments from different research fields and traditions. It emphasized correlations between information in general, access to ICTs as well as the digital infrastructure and the economic benefits that such access can provide for the society and individuals. This approach was based on the idea of a complex nature of the digital divide and its consequences for the society.

The increasing penetration and usage of the internet worldwide, in parallel with the rise in the production of professional and user-generated digital content and the evolution of technical platforms, resulted in the new processes of social development

based on a new quality of ICTs and digital media (Flew, 2008). Media scholars paid more attention to the impact on media production than media consumption and highlighted that the digital revolution might change the principles of production and distribution of goods and services as well as the political public sphere and cultural milieu. As Castells argued, contemporary social and economic life has been significantly influenced by the digital infrastructure, in turn becoming a backbone for the e-economy, digital markets and finances, e-democracy and digital society (Castells, 2001).

Wessels elaborated the idea of Castells and stated: "For economies to be competitive in a global market, they need to be connected to the digital infrastructure and they require a labor force that has the education and skills to work in an e-economy" (Wessels, 2013: 21). Accordingly, new demands for human capital would progressively determine the requirements for education, media, social participation and cultural practices within evolving digital environments. This became a crucial point for later research, which tried to reconceptualize digital inequality and exclusion as a social problem. Such a problem needed to be solved on different levels and in different spheres, including the state/public sphere, business sphere and personal sphere, first and foremost when it came to developing the technological skills and personal awareness/motivation of users (Park, 2017). Many studies expected users' behaviour and experiences to move into "digital worlds, which would define forms, content and even nature of communication" (Robins & Webster, 1999). Therefore, "as the world becomes increasingly interconnected, both economically and socially, technology adaptation remains one of the defining factors in human progress" (Poushter, 2016: 3). In fact, an advanced vision of digital inclusion as digital engagement presupposed substantial personal involvement in the process of making and implementing digital skills.

At this stage, the digital divide research shifted to an anthropological angle by analysing the role of social status, education, individual abilities and personal motivations in making digital engagement successful at the level of an individual (Park, 2017). In addition, increasing anxiety over the societal and cultural effects of some modern applications of digital ICT emerged. More specifically, there was a concern that the economic emphasis and increasing use of these technologies would widen the digital gaps, which, accompanied by the ongoing socioeconomic polarization, could sharpen social inequality across the globe (Nieminen, 2016; Sparks, 2013).

Together with the discussion about the effects of the digital divide on socioeconomic life, the issue of participation – both societal and individual – in the new digital environment became widely discussed in the academic community. This view was partially based on the idea that individuals' digital engagements played key roles in a range of outcomes – from academic performance and labour market success to entrepreneurship and health services' uptake. Those who function better in the digital realm and participate more fully in digitally mediated social life enjoy advantages over their digitally disadvantaged counterparts (Park, 2017). Clearly, the concept of digital inequality was understood as a multidimensional phenomenon of a complex social and

individual nature. Thus, problems of developing relevant theoretical approaches and subsequent policy measures became extremely important– especially in the context of increasing empirical research on the access to and use of ICTs at national and local levels worldwide (Ragnedda & Muschert, 2013).

In the 2000s, several authors, including the Dutch scholar Jan van Dijk, proposed more nuanced and complex theoretical explanations of the empirical data. Van Dijk developed his approach to the relational view of equality, which he conceptualized as a resources and appropriation theory of diffusion, acceptance and adoption of new technologies (Van Dijk, 2005). As he claimed:

> The following four are the core concepts of this theory: a number of personal and positional categorical inequalities in society; the distribution of resources relevant to this type of inequality; a number of kinds of access to ICTs; a number of fields of participation in the society. (Van Dijk, 2013: 32)

In addition to these four concepts, van Dijk suggested a fifth one, namely the state of affairs determining the type of inequality to be explained. Van Dijk concentrated on the core point of his approach – equality/inequality, thus making the debate on the digital divide socially focused. While examining the digital divide as a research object and as a social construct, he developed a dynamic model labelling different kinds of access – from motivation to physical and material access to digital skills and to usage (ibid.: 35). All of them affect the degree of participation in different fields of society: economic (jobs), social (contacts), political (voting), cultural (cyber-culture), spatial (mobile life) and institutional (citizen rights). Within this approach, scholars also analysed how ICTs perform a societal function through information and communication provision, allowing access to socially significant content considered to be part of, for example, nationhood construction (Nieminen, 2016: 21). Following van Dijk's idea about the importance of social participation, the complex approach to the dynamic interaction of "access and use" gained more significance.

The third stage in the digital divide research focused on new "divides" and their negative consequences for the society, mostly for smaller communities and individuals. This focus reflected an emerging vision among scholars and policy makers that the policies meant to prevent the digital divides based on increasing technological and economic access to infrastructure have not been equally successful and do not provide straightforward solutions to the problem (Park, 2017). It became clear that the digital divide was not a static phenomenon but one heavily influenced by changes taking place on both the national and the global level (uneven development of the internet connection in different regions, the growth of e-commerce and e-democracy, changing audience behaviour and consumption practices under the influence of non-linear digital services, the spread of digital content flows, etc.). The appearance of such new "divides" under different transformation factors led to the further elaboration of traditional and new concepts, such as:

- *Digital exclusion* as a barrier to active social participation and economic activities for information "have-nots" (Williams et al., 2016). This concept will be partially illustrated later, using the case of the multi-ethnic Russian society and the correlation between ethnicity and access there;
- *Digital delay*, as a form of the digital divide that may disappear as internet connectivity and experience normalize (Nguyen, 2012);
- *The participatory divide*, referring to digital participation and understood as the use of the internet to create and transmit digital political resources, specifically involving a lack of digital skills, which might have effects on the development of the national network society (Morales et al., 2016);
- *Internet overuse* or even pathological dependence on digital networks and services, which has an effect on the clarity of self as a result of growing digital engagement (Israelashvili et al., 2012).

Still, in the latest digital divide research, the political economy approach remains influential and the main groups within digital society – those who are not connected, those who are connected but do not use the internet efficiently and those who use it excessively – are viewed from the perspective of social stratification. However, the new and more complex digital environment, often described as digital ecosystems, poses more complicated questions regarding the ways in which digital spheres influence people's opportunities and different uses of technologies may lead to further inequalities (Dimaggio et al., 2004).

Dahlberg agreed that the key problem of the digital divide was still digital inequality but stated that

> … what is largely overlooked in this focus on the context of users is the contexts structuring digital media technologies, by which I mean the social, cultural, political and economic relations that structure digital media technologies and thereby shape their use. (Dahlberg, 2015: 271)

While this view is common for the political economy paradigm, Dahlberg specifically emphasizes the political and economic context of "social media platforms". By platforms, the scholar understands "web applications in which users who accept certain 'terms of service' are able to enter a user-friendly computational environment that provides particular structured services and experiences" (Dahlberg: 272). Dahlberg underlines the issue of corporate dominance within social media ownership, which combines ownership of physical infrastructures and intellectual property. Paradoxically, though, corporate ownership has become a crucial characteristic of new personalized digital environments, which are almost totally defined by one "social media platform" instead of a diversity of internet content and services: "For an increasing number of users the internet is now synonymous with Facebook, and in fact many Facebook users do not even consider themselves internet users" (ibid.: 276).

Dahlberg proposes the following new levels of the digital divide: the control divide (control of usage through "terms of use"), the surveillance divide (by social media corporations), the exploitation divide (based on the advertising business model) and the visibility divide (representation of users' voices in social media).

Though critical approaches to the nature of the digital divide characterize the present state of the research, scholarly approaches have been affected by the need for policy making advocating equality in different senses. On the one hand, there is a growing understanding of the narrowing technological gap, resulting from efforts by various political and business stakeholders involved in the realization of active state policies. Digital infrastructures, connectivity, economy and even literacy programmes have been developed, and users have gained new possibilities to benefit from digitalization (De Prato et al., 2014).

On the other hand, it is crucial to underline that digital inclusion is not interaction merely with ICTs but also with social institutions and other users. Park suggested the concept of digital capital as a result of users' digital skills, literacy, engagement and readiness. Digital capital might be considered a new form of Bourdieu's cultural capital: in the digital society, this concept brings together the social and the individual, embracing upbringing, education, indicators of social class, personal experience and motivation, and it is a consequence of a wide range of factors – technological and non-technological and economic and non-economic (Park, 2017). As users, individuals and people come to the core of the emerging research, the anthropological approach becomes rather relevant.

Mapping the digital divide

As we have already seen, empirical research has traditionally defined the digital divide as "a disparity between those who have easy access to computers and the internet and those who do not. Patterns of unequal access are often related to global inequalities and to individual factors such as income, age, and/or gender issues" (Chandler & Munday, 2011: 102). Although the central idea is access to technological equipment and telecommunication networks, some scholars analyze the problem in a broader sense, focusing also on the problem of use (Sparks, 2013).

The complexity of the problem has generated numerous definitions, which have emerged not only in academic and expert communities but also at the political decision-making level. For instance, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) pointed out that

> the term "digital divide" refers to the gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographical areas at different socio-economic levels with regard both to their opportunities to access information and communication technologies (ICTs) and their use of the internet for a wide variety of activities. (OECD, 2001)

Today, daily activities, social participation and the spare time of users call for new skills to use digital media technologies and to be digitally connected, which makes the problem of inclusion in societal life more and more significant (van Dijk, 2005). Bearing in mind the rapid progress of the internet, the digital economy, e-democracy and new digital media, especially social media, in the last two decades, it is essential to determine how important the problem of access really is.

Originally, the problem of access focused primarily on access to technologies. In today's digital environment, however, it has come to embrace other aspects as well, including economic, political and cultural dimensions in national and global contexts. Given that scholars today name "the recognition of inequality and social and political polarization as major threats to our liberal democracies" (Nieminen, 2017: 4) and put divide and inequality issues in a broader societal context, the access problem is becoming exceedingly important.

The nature of the term "digital divide", its transformation and its present understanding have been widely explored in media studies. Many studies have taken a starting point close to Williams's argument about "social shaping approaches to technology", focusing on the ways in which technology is embedded into social relations and shaped by social factors (Williams, 1973: 17). One might say that it is still not only people's wish to use ICT but more broadly the policy of a society and the readiness of social institutions and policies to prevent digital inequality by increasing the level of digital inclusion and digital participation. According to Wessels (2013: 18), "The utilization of technology within economic, political and socio-cultural processes of society shape inequality".

For the last two decades, the digital divide has been examined with regard to statistical data about the current inequalities and divisions within society (Norris, 2001). However, the problem's interpretation was closely connected to the widening penetration of ICTs at both national and global levels. Its origins might be traced back to the debate about the information society and the gaps within it, identifying "information haves" and "information have-nots" as access to computers and telecommunication networks result in a changing number of "information rich" and "information poor" citizens (Vartanova, 2002). Consequently, the development of the digital divide on the country level and worldwide has been measured by a number of indicators, such as sources of inequality in access (computers, network and services) and in usage (computers, network and services). At each stage, indicators of different natures have emphasized economic, technological, social and cultural gaps and focused on the relations to social and socio-cultural inequality generated by age, behavioural and value patterns, lifestyle differences and personal motivations. In the following, we will discuss some dimensions and manifestations of the digital divide in society that we consider to be worth mentioning in this context.

Access divide. When the concept of the digital divide started to develop in the 1980s, the central problem was unequal access of users to personal computers, at that time the only electronic device used for internet connection (Compaine, 2001). Some scholars

even argue that the term "digital divide" originated from research on computer ownership gaps in the US and was used to mark the first generational gap by introducing the concept of a "Net Generation" (Acharya, 2017). Scholarship has analysed various reasons for generation gaps, including demographic, economic and technological reasons, involving individual relations to material resources or equipment ownership or the overall wealth of countries.

Access to telecommunication networks as providers of online content and services was considered to be the key reason for digital inequality in the early 1990s. It was obviously of a technical nature, and possibilities to be online, connected and networked were a key condition for "information haves". The broadening of internet penetration in primarily developed countries created better conditions for the "North" than for the "South" and for the "West" than for the "East" (Ragnedda & Muschert, 2013). As many scholars underlined, the first gaps within countries and between states at the global level represented the existing inequalities in access to traditional resources paralleled by the existing social and regional divisions (Compaine, 2001).

In the 1990s, the uneven development of countries and regions visible at the global level subsequently defined the levels of telecommunication and ICT progress as well as the gaps in access to the global infrastructure. The level of national technologic infrastructure and general wealth were considered to be major barriers to equality in ICTs' use in different countries and regions. Subsequently, the less developed countries of the global "South" continued to be excluded from the emerging global information society and digital economy (Servaes & Carpentier, 2006).

On the other hand, in the more developed countries of the global "North", the socio-economic status and background of users and their level of education, ethnicity, age and gender appeared to be decisive factors that were shaping the digital divide more and more noticeably. The access to digital devices and social networks increased the amount of social capital of a person, which in turn contributed to social connectivity, created new learning possibilities, increased career opportunities and, along with this, added to changes in the societal and political life quality of users (see Balčytienė & Juraitė, this volume).

Socio-demographic divide. In the late 1990s, scholars began to acknowledge the socio-economic status and background of users and their level of education, ethnicity, age and gender as fundamental factors that shape the digital divides in society. This happened due to the progress of technologies, in terms of both network penetration and the decrease in the prices of computers and telecommunication tariffs and the growing availability of services and online content. All these factors made access to the internet cheaper and more widespread, especially due to the creation and spread of mobile telephony as an alternative technology for online distribution.

However, the demographic gaps that attracted the attention of scholars in the 1990s-2000s reflected persisting discrepancies in economic wealth. Within countries, the digital divide demonstrated the existence of class-based differences among producers

of online content, such as bloggers, Facebook and Twitter users, raters of movies and chat room participants (Anthes, 2011).

In sum, the noticeable division lines in the emerging digital societies in regard to the access to and use of computers and the internet, clearly shaped by gender, race, ethnicity, age and education, in their turn reflected social injustices. Many recent sociological surveys and studies have shown that, despite the continuing growth of the availability of digital technologies and the reduction in their price, digital gaps remain between men and women, children, parents and grandparents as well as people with different levels of education (Colombo et al., 2015; McMurtrey et al., 2012).

Motivational divide. The present focus on individual motivation and level of competence represents a new stage in the analysis of the complex phenomenon. As van Dijk (2013: 35) underlines, "prior to physical access comes the wish to have a computer and to be connected to the internet". This is a rather new approach to the complexities of the digital divide and access problem. According to many studies, there is a substantial number of people who might be called "want nots" in their attitude towards digital technology. In parallel with the diffusion of technology in society, consumers'

> interest to computers and internet access have obviously grown, but still some people lack motivations regarding new media. German and US surveys identified major reasons for the refusal including: no need, no time, no desire, lack of money, lack of skills, and even rejection of the medium. (van Dijk, 2013: 36)

In this anthropological turn in the digital divide research, users' motivation, skills and demands are at the centre of debates about the use or non-use of digital technologies. Recent data on their use among US citizens illustrates how motivation and its relation to digital skills and digital readiness are new challenges for internet usage: the majority of users – 60 per cent of the participants – stated that it was difficult for them to know whether the information that they found online was trustworthy (Rainie, 2016: 42). This anthropological focus definitely brings forward a more up-to-date focus on individual reasons in a situation in which the overall technical access to the digital infrastructure is permanently growing. In summarizing the reasons for not being online (which affects the digital divide), Rainie outlined a cluster of reasons, shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Reasons not to be online among US citizens

Groups of reasons	Per cent
Relevance (not interested + waste of time + too busy + don't need/want)	34
Usability (difficult + too old + don't know how + worried about viruses, etc.)	32
Price (too expensive + don't have a computer)	19
Lack of availability/access	7

Source: Rainie (2016: 38).

Moreover, the dynamics of the modern digital divide demonstrate a paradoxical spiral evolution, combining old and new factors related to digital inequality. The old factors are the ones traditionally focused on general access to ICTs, while the new ones relate both to more developed technological services that people can access and, which is also important, the personal characteristics of users (their sociodemographic profile, motivation, etc.). Among the newer reasons for not having broadband in US homes, Rainie identified the costs of subscription and computers (43% of respondents), motivational reasons, such as the use of mobiles instead of wired computers, dissatisfaction with services and so on (27%).[1]

At the same time, regardless of the recent technological developments and policy measures, the present state of access to computers, the internet, and mobile technologies in many countries is still far from perfect. Recent statistics provided by the Pew Research Center illustrate some key aspects of the digital divide (see Table 2).

Table 2. The demographics of internet use by different groups in selected European countries (2015; in per cent)

		Age		Education		Income	
	Total	18-34	35+	Less education	More education	Lower income	Higher income
United Kingdom	88	98	85	82	98	82	98
Spain	87	100	82	81	97	80	95
Germany	85	99	80	74	92	73	95
France	75	98	66	65	95	61	87
Italy	72	100	65	68	95	56	87
Russia	72	97	60	-	-	51	81
Poland	69	98	56	28	78	56	81

Source: Poushter (2016: 11).

Table 2 demonstrates that, even in economically advanced countries – for example, the UK or Germany – gaps with regard to internet use between different age groups remain. A clear consequence of this generation gap is illustrated by the highest possible level of internet use by younger people – so called "digital natives", or the "Millennial generation": in Canada, Italy and Spain, all young people are online, and the number is extremely high in the US, Germany, the UK and Russia in comparison with the internet use of the older groups.

Other visible differences in internet use can be seen between more and less educated people and between users with different income levels. Some descriptive statistics show gaps between other socio-demographic groups as well. For instance, the digital divide on gender grounds is rather common in many states, and recent statistics indicate a

1. 30 per cent did not respond.

gender-based digital divide in smartphone ownership. It is the usual practice that men have wider access than women in many countries (Pousher, 2016: 13).

The focus of the following subsection is the correlation between ethnicity and the digital divide in a multi-ethnic society, such as Russia. We believe that providing all ethnic and other minor groups with access to ICTs might be a way to guarantee minorities equal opportunities to develop, reach their target audience and air their views and interests in public. Pluralism in cyberspace also supports the access of all citizens to a wide spectrum of cultural representations, values and opinions of diverse communities, thus broadening everyone's cultural horizons and encouraging people to approach things in different ways. A pluralistic online media environment is a fundamental contributor to a multicultural society in which the interests and cultural identities of all the members of society are equally respected and protected (Gladkova, 2015). Additionally, we should remind ourselves that diversity and equality are closely connected, although this connection, as McQuail points out, is twofold:

> On the one hand, equality can be seen as the maximisation of diversity where all have the same rights of access and treatment, while on the other hand, diversity can be seen as requiring media access and content and reception to approximately mirror the actual diversity of society in respect of locality, ethnicity, preferences, etc. (see McQuail, this volume, chapter 2)

In every society, manifestations of the digital divide are influenced by a whole range of factors, including socioeconomic, political, cultural, linguistic, geographical and technological ones. Despite more or less universally accepted theoretical approaches to digital inequality and views on how it correlates with social inequality in general, every country represents a unique mixture of old and new forms of the digital divide based on the country's background, history and current situation. In this regard, Russia makes a good case to study emerging digital inequalities (first and foremost related to access), since the multi-ethnic, multicultural and multilinguistic nature of Russia, its geopolitical position and the complexity of the historical heritage of the country constitute the unique character of the Russian society and culture (Vartanova, 2012). In sum, Russia is an illustrative example of social, cultural and technological complexity within Europe.

Mixing old and new: The case of Russia's multi-ethnic society

In the course of the post-Soviet transformations, the Russian media system has been influenced by a number of geopolitical and cultural factors that have defined the nationally specific Russian model of the digital divide. One factor is the diverse ethnic structure of the population, speaking more than 170 languages besides the official Russian and populating the largest territory in Europe, spreading over 11 time zones and unevenly connected by transportation and ICT infrastructures. This explains the

dominance of federal television channels transmitted via both terrestrial and satellite networks in the country's media system. According to the Russian census of 2010, there are over 190 ethnic groups in the territory of the Russian Federation (Delitsyn, 2006; Vartanova, 2012). The ethnic structure of the population also affects the media industry's functioning, especially in economically depressed regions with minority language media. From here on, our analysis focuses primarily on one of the many problems of the digital divide, namely multi-ethnicity, in the huge country of Russia.

Internet and digital media have become visible signs of change in post-Soviet Russia, first in the mid-1990s, when ICTs began to penetrate large industrial Russian cities in the European part of the territory, and later in the mid-2000s, when digital technologies became available to the majority of the urban population. The real breakthrough happened in the early 2010s as the number of internet connections exceeded half the Russian population and the average mobile telephony penetration was almost equal to the size of population (Deviatko, 2013: 120-127; Mediasistema Rossii, 2015).

In 2017, the monthly number of internet users in Russia (defined as those who go online at least once per month) was 81.8 million people or 70 per cent of the total population (2017).[2] In the recent decades, the internet has become the second main source of information for Russians after television: 41 per cent of Russians regularly check news websites to read the latest news, and 19 per cent use forums, blogs and social networks for that purpose.[3] The audience's level of trust in the internet has grown in the past years: in 2017, 18 per cent of Russians stated that they trusted information found on news websites compared with 15 per cent in 2015 (ibid.).

In the 1990s, Russia faced all forms of digital divides. Starting from a very low level of access and almost zero penetration of the telecommunication infrastructure in 1991, the year of the dissolution of the USSR, the level of information and digital literacy of the general audience was very low. The major division lines were, like elsewhere, access to technologies, place of residence, gender, occupation, age and the growing convergence of these factors (Deviatko, 2013: 119-128).

The difference between federal districts of Russia in terms of internet access today is not dramatic but noticeable. In the summer of 2017, for example, the North-Western federal district demonstrated the highest number of monthly internet audience members (75%) among all the federal districts, while the Volga federal district showed the lowest (65%) (ibid.). In 2017, all the federal districts of Russia experienced growth in the numbers of internet users compared with 2016, by at least several per cent each (e.g. the Ural federal district experienced +1 per cent growth of the monthly internet audience in 2017 compared with 2016; the South federal district and the Siberian federal district gained 3 per cent; the Far Eastern federal district gained 7 per cent, etc.).[4] In the 2000s, the inequality of the regions in terms of digital access has fell, and the social, age and gender balance among Russian internet users have improved

2. http://fom.ru/SMI-i-internet/13783
3. http://fom.ru/SMI-i-internet/13323
4. http://www.bizhit.ru/index/users_count/0-151

(Mediasistema Rossii, 2015). Nonetheless, the problem of digital inequality across the large territory of Russia remains quite urgent.

A survey conducted by the Russian Fund "Public Opinion" revealed[5] that there are two main groups of Russians who do not use the internet: those who do not have access to it but wish to use it and those who do not wish to use it at all. According to the survey results, the first group comprises 10 per cent of the Russian population, and the other one 40 per cent. The first group (mostly women below the age of 44 with a low income) has been constantly reducing due to the expansion of the internet around the country, and the second one, which consists mainly of women above 55 years old with a low income, is rather stable. The majority of respondents belonging to the first group live in the countryside (42%); among the second group, this category accounts for 59 per cent.

Nevertheless, the Russian internet has grown as a core part of the Russian media system as a communication platform for Russians with different social and cultural backgrounds. Bearing in mind the immense ethno-cultural heterogeneity of Russian society and the uneven economic and technological conditions of the Russian territory, it is worth discussing the correlation between the ethnic, cultural and linguistic factors and the digital gap in the country. Paradoxically, this aspect has rarely been in the spotlight of researchers. Previous studies have rather focused on the correlation between age, income and gender factors and digital inequality (e.g. Delitsyn, 2006; Deviatko, 2013; Smirnova, 2009).

ICTs in Russian society could be viewed as important means to build a society in which diverse ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic groups have equal freedom of expression and access to information, possess equal digital skills and media literacy and are able to use this freedom in both offline and online communication with a high level of media pluralism and received diversity. Received diversity (Peruško, 2013: 207) is a more recent dimension of media pluralism that integrates the consideration of the media audience and its actual choices of media and their content in reflections on media policy. This type of diversity includes "the possibility of access to a diverse mix of media and media programs that can (or should) contribute to media literate active citizens".

The spread of digital technologies in a population with a diverse ethnic and linguistic background becomes a challenge in terms of overcoming the gaps in the existing infrastructures and the emerging digital inequalities. Previous research (e.g. Gladkova et al., 2018; Magadeeva, 2017; Tishkov & Malahov, 2002) shows that many ethnic groups in Russia today have limited access to digital technologies and the internet or/and/or quite often lack the digital competences and skills necessary to use advanced technologies. Minorities that belong to ethnic groups residing outside their territories or that lack a specific territory within the Russian Federation face particular difficulties in ensuring access to electronic media in their own language (Protsyk & Harzl, 2013).

When analysing the Russian realities of the digital divide, one aspect in particular should be considered: the historically strong relations between the media and the

5. http://runet.fom.ru/Proniknovenie-interneta/10249

state. These relations had a complex and multilayer nature, embracing controversial motivations for political control and economic support, for representation of ethnic and linguistic diversity and for safeguarding shared social values and the cultural and religious traditions of Russian citizens. In this context, the instrumental role of the press in Imperial Russia can be mentioned. Furthermore, Soviet journalism theory had a clear normative character, stressing the social mission of the media to preserve unity in the ideologically driven and non-ethnically diverse society (Nordenstreng et al., 2002). The vision of mass media, both their nature and their role, in post-Soviet Russia was influenced by these theoretical approaches.

In the 1990s, research on post-Soviet media mostly evaluated the state–media relations from the critical perspective of press freedom. However, approaches within media economics and media policy emphasized the need to evaluate the complexity and diversity of the roles played by the state in Russian media. Economic and technological dimensions of the emerging Russian media policy as well as ethnic and cultural diversity issues have to be put in the broader social context of a national political culture, post-crisis economy and non-active civil society (Vartanova, 2012). This approach also explains the active role of the state in various fields of policy making, including national ethnic and media policies.

Traditionally, the policy-making process in Russia has been defined as "top-down" by legislators, giving much attention to smaller ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups and claiming the necessity to provide them with better access to the internet and media in their native language. Several fundamental documents, such as the Constitution of the Russian Federation (1993), the State national policy of the Russian Federation (1996), the federal laws "On languages of the peoples of the Russian Federation"[6] and "On securing rights of small indigenous peoples of the Russian Federation",[7] the federal state programme "Strengthening of the unity of the Russian Nation and the ethno-cultural development of the peoples of Russia (2014-2020)"[8] and the Strategy of national policy in Russian Federation up to 2025[9] create a legal framework for the state protection of equality on ethic, cultural and linguistic grounds. For example, the legal framework protects the rights of Russians to receive and distribute information in their native language and outlines several strategic initiatives aimed at protecting ethnic languages and cultures. The documents hence emphasize the important role of mass media in building intercultural dialogue and communication across nations and ethnicities and support the creation of new media outlets (print, audiovisual and online) in languages of Russian ethnic groups and in several languages (i.e. the Russian language plus the language of a particular ethnic group).

The official national policy might be analysed in the context of the "principle of universality" and the intention to promote the equality principle. For Russian officials, the idea of appealing to different sections of the audience (Steemers, this volume

6. http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_15524/
7. http://docs.cntd.ru/document/901732262
8. http://government.ru/docs/22925/
9. http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/36512

chapter 11) might signal an understanding of the need for a more reflective and open diverse media environment in a multi-ethnic Russian society and the need to provide all ethnic groups with equal opportunities for development and self-representation.

However, the outcomes of legal regulation and official policies are always dependent on the resources available for their implementation. Most often there are gaps between the announced values and aims of policies and the final results. For instance, the Russian federal state national strategies aiming to support ethnic, cultural and linguistic equality in the Russian regions are implemented under the influence of multiple factors, including: a) macro-layer factors, such as the state of technological and economic development of the region, in turn including the level of broadband distribution and internet household penetration, the specific character of regional political culture and the state of the educational system; and b) micro-layer factors, such as the openness of the regional media system, the quality of ethnic journalism and the demand of audiences, especially young ones, for content in their native language (Mediasistema Rossii, 2015).

As a result, the digital divide between different ethnic and linguistic groups in Russia – first and foremost in terms of access and subsequently in terms of their ability to express themselves offline and online – remains an important problem. The digital divide among ethnic and linguistic communities in Russia obviously hampers the progress of the civil society, informed decision making, the maintenance of ethnic identity and the preservation of a national culture and language identity through technologically modern media communications.

Although legislators have created a legal framework for the regional state authorities and financial state–private partnerships (with telecommunication and mobile operators), the subsequent development is far from perfect. As mentioned above, for instance, the federal district of Volga demonstrated the smallest monthly internet audience (65%) among all the federal districts of Russia in 2017.[10] This fact is interesting, since the Volga federal district is home to the biggest ethnic groups of Russia (excluding ethnic Russians, of course) – the Tatar, the Bashkir and the Chuvash. The situation is similar in other regions where ethnic groups often exceed the population of ethnic Russians or at least are similar in size (i.e. so-called titular nations). The Ural federal district, for example (+1% monthly internet audience in 2017 compared with 2016), is a home for the Khanty and Mansi people, the Nenets people and others; the South federal district (+3%) for the Adyghs, the Kalmyks and others; the Siberian federal district (+3%) for the Buryats, the Soyots, the Khakas and others; and the Far Eastern federal district (+7%) for the Yakuts, the Chukchi and others.

The overall dynamics suggest that the digital divide, at least in terms of access to the ICT infrastructure, among ethnic groups in Russian regions is starting to decrease. At the same time, the uneven regional development, with economic hardships in different parts of the country, the absence of statistical data on the level of users' skills and motivation to use digital technologies in Russian regions and the lack of monitoring

10. Ibid.

bodies make it difficult to determine how the digital inclusion of different ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups is progressing.

Media policy is another important area with a potentially strong influence on the digital divide. During the last decade, the Russian media policy has been aimed at the expansion of government regulation, leading to the introduction of a number of amendments. Several legislative initiatives currently implemented in the Russian media policy sphere have been subject to criticism, both public and scholarly, for example the so-called "Bloggers' law", stating that owners of websites and/or web pages that are visited by more than 3,000 users daily are considered to be bloggers and that such bloggers must observe certain legislative requirements, and the "Law against anonymizers and VPN", prohibiting the use of technologies enabling access to blocked websites, also known as anonymizers. Since 2012, the Federal Service for Supervision in the Sphere of Communications, Information Technologies and Mass Communications (Roskomnadzor) has also been compiling a list of sites with illegal content that must be blocked by Russian providers. Scholars, as well as representatives of public institutions and regular internet users, have been discussing the possible impact of these and other governmental initiatives on the access to information in Russia in general as well as the possible restrictions of such initiatives on digital inequality in particular.

Concluding the analysis of the digital divide realities in a multi-ethnic and multicultural society like Russia, several questions require further consideration. First, it is crucial to put the policy to overcome digital exclusion into a more general social framework to reduce national stereotypes and possible tensions on ethnic grounds. In a society that began to reconstruct its national, ethnic and cultural identity in 1991, this is not only a matter of contributing to the social inclusion of smaller ethnic groups in the society but also an attempt to create a new vision of an active and involved citizenship in a multi-ethnic and multilinguistic and digitalizing society. In this regard, the access problem, with its technological and economic dimensions, seems to be solved by state agencies and businesses using the available instruments over time. Motivational and educational aspects and a broader engagement problem on the other hand need to be discussed on the basis of a multi-stakeholder approach. More specifically, the implementation of policies to overcome digital gaps is hard and time consuming and requires a multi-angle and multidisciplinary approach (Deviatko, 2013).

Second, in countries like Russia that are still searching for post-transitional social and cultural identities in the context of media digitalization, media policy is deeply integrated into the state processes. Digital collaboration in society is characterized by a number of controversies. The impact of the two domains – politics and culture – is obviously the most influential. The exceptional role of the Russian state in policy making has been defined not only by the nature of the state and the state relationship with business interests but also by the sociocultural traditions of society (Nordenstreng et al., 2002). The complexity of tasks in national media policy making has become even more noticeable with the rise of digitalization and the convergence of media. Already poorly established normative principles of media policy have been challenged further

by the rise of the neoliberal philosophy of the digital online media environment, requiring minimal or no regulation. These new tendencies are increasingly influencing the present media regulation in Russia, proving that Russia remains a unique environment for media policy making in Europe.

Discussion and conclusions

In the last decades, policies and measures to prevent digital exclusion, such as improved technological infrastructures, cheap and easy access to technologies and digital literacy programmes to increase digital engagement, are considered to be key instruments in overcoming new forms of inequality across the world. Scholars have underlined the importance of and identified several approaches to policies aimed at solving the digital divide problem (Park, 2017; Ragnedda & Muschert, 2013). As a result, policy makers at the national and global levels have often taken such approaches as guidelines for further policy actions, for example following suggestions and solutions from different stakeholders in state and interstate strategies to build an information society (European Union) as a response to the growing digitalization and diffusion of internet services.

Several policy instruments should be mentioned as well-known and effective measures to overcome the digital divide, including the principle of universal access to the internet provided at the level of the European Union, the Council of Europe and some nation states, especially in Europe (Nieminen, 2016; Pittaluga & Rivoir, 2012; Williams et al., 2016). Policies to overcome the digital divide are also numerous in post-Socialist countries in Europe, where they generally focus on developing universal access in public places (Peruško, 2013; Vartanova, 2002). Some scholars, however stress that fundamental political and economic changes, beyond the development of telecommunication infrastructures and IT industries, are required as well (Fuchs & Novak, 2008).

Political decision making in North America and Europe has aimed to solve the very basic though crucial problem of technical access to ITC nationally and regionally. In strategic policy documents, such as information society programmes, strategies and doctrines, rights-based demands for technical access have been paralleled by concerns about economic efficiency, mainly important for private businesses. As Sparks underlined, in the new century, with the change to left-wing governments, "the general direction of the policy in both the US and the EU became one of relying more and more on the workings of the market to overcome these inequalities" (Sparks, 2013: 39).

Some national contexts, especially post-Socialism ones, like Russia, might prove that even increased legislative activities, supported by the introduction of economic subsidies as part of the media policy, create better conditions for access to technologies, networks and services and increase socially significant media content production. The

usage and literacy issues need at the same time a more complex approach combining top-down (legislative initiatives and programmes) and bottom-up (active participation of the public society and citizens) approaches for their development.

The logics of profit making have dominated in the global economic perspectives, creating better conditions for the e-economy and economic performance of large telecommunication and internet companies. However, relying on the workings of the market in overcoming gaps does not represent a holistic or equality-based approach to preventing the digital divide. Sparks emphasizes that "all these policies have failed to make any difference to the overall picture of digital inequality" (Sparks, 2013: 31).

From a normative point of view, it is clear that potential for improvement might be found mostly in the area of the formation of digital skills as well as the building of awareness and motivation. New forms of literacy, based on digital competence, have become the grounds for the Media and information literacy (MIL) policy and strategy – the key trajectory of the UNESCO activities to promote equality worldwide. The UNESCO guidelines stress that "MIL … enable people to acquire competences to advocate and create their own counterbalance to dominant cultures thus protecting cultural diversity, multilingualism and pluralism" (Grizzle & Calvo, 2013: 13). Research has proved that, although higher levels of digital literacy have been achieved, it is still not obvious how to create a favourable environment for learning or how to nurture the capabilities of citizens (UNESCO, 2013: 17). This can probably explain why many international organizations and nations have shifted their focus in their struggle against the digital divide from general strategies to less holistic but more realistic educational programmes aimed at developing digital skills for different social groups, starting in schools and continuing with training programmes in lifelong learning formats for adults and senior citizens.

With the rise of a digital society, the ownership of digital devices, digital skills and literacy and digital engagement to a large extent define the quality of life. There is some kind of academic unanimity in identifying, analysing and theorizing the digital divide and its various layers, forms and reasons. At the same time, numerous studies clearly indicate that there are no universal strategies to overcome the problem.

The global and national experience of the last decades shows that the digital divide needs to be identified and addressed by a complex set of policies along the political, economic, technical and cultural dimensions. The complexity of policies and other measures is partly brought about by the insufficiency of the market-driven development of the telecommunication and IT industries. The traditional public service mission of media policies might be better suited to creating awareness and motivation. What is also important is to remember that overcoming digital inequalities requires a systematic, complex approach. Such an approach should combine top-down and bottom-up initiatives and programmes, be aimed at creating better public engagement, stimulate citizens to develop their digital skills to benefit from digital inclusion and involve state, business and public institutions when it comes to overcoming the digital divide in the society.

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