

Book Review: Digital Interactions in Developing Countries: An Economic Perspective

by Blog Admin

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*Challenging the existing literature by international and governmental institutions, this book looks not only at the digital divide but also at issues such as digital preparedness, leapfrogging and low-cost computers. **Pietro Manzella** thinks that although this book is targeted towards practitioners and experts in the field, the general reader and those grappling with this topic for the first time will also gain some valuable insights from this work.*



Digital Interactions in Developing Countries: An Economic Perspective. Jeffrey James. Routledge. January 2013.

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Digital Interactions in Developing Countries: An Economic Perspective explores a topic which has been given new momentum recently: the spread of information technology (IT) in the developing world. Yet this is done moving away from traditional approaches, for the author adopts an innovative research perspective. A critical analysis of the most recent developments in the field is provided, investigated in an economic perspective in order to expose the underlying dynamics of the IT revolution.

The aim here is two-fold. First, research of this kind should provide an important contribution to the literature, since current work on this topic is not extensive. In addition – and this is a recurring theme of the book – an attempt is made to investigate the relationship between IT and economic developments without resorting to concepts and definitions which are specific to Western countries. This is because these notions are context-bound and run the risk of failing to capture the peculiarities of this interconnection in the countries surveyed (among others, Botswana, Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Namibia). The volume consists of 20 chapters, which are presented in three parts: ‘The Digital Divide’, ‘Digital Preparedness’, and ‘Leapfrogging, Appropriate Information Technology and Poverty’.

In the context of this review, two chapters are of particular interest. The first one, ‘The Digital Divide Across All Citizens of the World: A New Concept’, is the point of departure for the conceptual analysis which underpins the arguments throughout the book. The digital divide – that is the difference in the use of IT between developed and developing countries, and its relative implications – needs to be defined considering actors from all over the world, irrespective of their origins. This is the leitmotif of the chapter, which outlines the mechanisms by which the existing notion of “digital divide” could be revisited. To this end, it is suggested that an analysis of individual income levels should be carried out worldwide, with a view to providing an estimate of the use of the Internet and welfare in low-income groups. Another justification for this approach is that it would help to assess the degree of inequality in Internet use among individuals with different income levels. This novel approach is well illustrated through a framework including two countries and two persons per country, which is supplemented by a set of numerical examples. The author then goes on to highlight the widening of the inequality gap among Internet users worldwide, both rich and poor. By way of example, as of 2006, the number of Internet users in Africa and Latin America/ the Caribbean was 33,334,800 and 96,386,009, respectively, whereas in North America there were 233,188,086 people with access to the Web (Source: Internet World Statistics, 2007). This discussion draws on previous literature on the global distribution of income, thus contributing to the debate among experts in the field. As the author cogently argues, a new notion of “digital divide” can be constructed by measuring Internet use across developing and emerging countries.

Another chapter which is certainly worth mentioning is 'Sharing Mobile Phones in Developing Countries: Implications for the Digital Divide'. It casts light on how notional differences might arise between developed and developing countries with an impact on how the issue is framed. In this sense, a focus on the use of mobile phones among the rich and the poor is given. Similar studies have been carried out in the past, yet based on the misleading assumption that the use of these devices takes place solely on the basis of individual ownership. "The whole idea of using the Internet oneself in order to benefit there from is a Western concept that has very little to do with the ways in which technology is actually exploited in poor societies" (p. 155). In fact, in developing countries such as this is far from the case, as here sharing constitutes an important component of local cultures. It is significant that if this factor is controlled for in the statistics, the gap in IT use between the wealthy and the poor is almost filled, albeit with some exceptions.

The case of Botswana is of particular significance in this connection. In the example given on p. 58, James shows that if sharing is taken into consideration, the digital divide between poor and rich goes down from 2.9% to 1.1%. An analysis is then given of the numerous definitions of digital divide in mobile phones as adopted by international organisations. In the author's view, if reference is made to the proportion of owners in developing and developed countries, it results in too narrow a definition, for in the former technology is mainly used through sharing. As a result, the surveys carried out in this area might be biased, and the outcomes will be negatively affected. The data provided in this chapter reinforce the author's argument that the current measures of this divide are overstated. There is a need to refer to household survey data, which in this connection are certainly more reliable.

Digital Interactions in Developing Countries: An Economic Perspective is targeted towards practitioners and experts in the field, yet the general reader and those grappling with this topic for the first time can also gain some valuable insights from this work. It is a well-written book and the arguments presented are clear and straightforward. A number of significant questions are raised which have long been overlooked by the existing literature. In addition, the author questions the view that less developed countries cannot produce innovation within their own borders. For this reason, the book has laid the foundations for future research in this area and might represent a point of departure for economists and researchers in other disciplines to engage in innovative thinking on these issues.

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