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## **The Digital Divide in Canada and the U.S.: Measurement and Meaning**

**Abstract:** During the 1990s, considerable policy-making effort was expended by the Canadian and U.S. national governments, deeply connected by economic and cultural relations (FTA, NAFTA, GATS, WTO, WIPO, etc.), in an attempt to anticipate the social and economic requirements necessary for the successful deployment and use of information and communication technology (ICT). In Canada the Information Highway Advisory Council (IHAC) and in the U.S. the National Information Infrastructure Advisory Council (NIIAC) proposed measures that would, ostensibly, guarantee universal telecommunications service and universal access to ICT. In the wake of globalization and privatization subsequent ongoing attempts to measure the effects of such policy measures have taken place (for example, NGOs, FCC, NTIA in the U.S. and, in Canada, NGOs, Statistics Canada, the CRTC, Industry Canada), and currently the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), in large part in response to the phenomenon known as the “Digital Divide.” However, despite strong economic and cultural bonds between Canada and the U.S., there is evidence that the two countries are not measuring the same economic, technical, or cultural variables, or committing equitable resources to determine that those measurements are significant or meaningful. Given that Canada and U.S. trade and cultural exchange are so profound, it would seem prudent to enquire whether *what* the two countries are measuring is similar and compatible, and whether they are leading to any solutions.

The socio-political issues addressed in the proposed paper involve the ways in which knowledge, as information or communication, is acquired and transferred in the information economy, in the globalized market context of North America. By investigating conflicting legislation (copyright, telecomm, privacy, FOI, etc.), trade and cultural agreements/studies (FTA, NAFTA, WTO, WIPO, WSIS, etc.), and government policy the proposed paper will identify and analyze the various technical and legislative means by which information/knowledge is either rendered accessible or, alternatively, rendered inaccessible. The methodology of the paper will be comparative, and will analyze historic and contemporary legislation and policy development in Canada and the U.S. It will include examples of statistical, political-economic, content analyses and meta-analyses of existing government studies (wherever those studies are, indeed, compatible enough to compare)..

The paper, which is related to an ongoing research project, will help point out to potential guarantors of access (librarians, legislators, policy-makers, and corporate interests), what incompatibilities or lacunae exist in the fabric of relevant legislation or policy. Second, the paper will help point out to interpreters of information transfer

issues (practitioners such as policy makers, librarians, and academics) ways in which they can use existing policy and legislation to their advantage, and to advocate for change, when it is seen to be necessary, in an informed manner.