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DIGITAL DIVIDE: ANALYSING THE IMPACT OF UNEQUAL ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY ON SOCIAL MOBILITY

INAMDAR TIPUSULTAN ALARSAHEB
sultan7inamdar@gmail.com
He has been a full-time faculty member at JSPM University, Pune (India). In addition to his primary role, he has been serving as a visiting faculty at the School of International Studies, FLAME University. He has also delivered guest lectures at CHRIST University for the UPSC students. Prof. Tipusultan is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in International Relations, further advancing his expertise and academic credentials in the field. Prof. Tipusultan has also been appointed as a subject expert to deliver guest lectures on National Television under the SWAYAMPRABHA scheme, an initiative by the Government of India under the Ministry of Education. His contributions to academia include authoring four books and publishing eight research articles in international journals. Furthermore, he has contributed chapters in three SCOPUS-indexed books and has completed a research project. https://orcid.org/0009-0001-1265-4648

Abstract

The digital divide differentiated by inequalities in access, skills, and social usage of technology has become a significant obstacle towards social mobility, further compounding the current disparities in economic, social, and education realms. The aim of this research is to explain how the lacking digital resources are more burdensome for the impoverished population, denying them opportunities to elevate their economic status. The exploration addresses the components of the digital divide, namely: access to devices, technology skills, and the actual use of the equipment, showing at the same time how far-reaching impact these relationships have on education, employment, and economic development. Students from underdeveloped regions are not able to gain entry in online platforms that give digital learning materials, resulting in a greater gap in the level of education. Likewise, low literacy levels in regard to use of modern technology as well as discrimination against those who do not have such technology discourages people from engaging in the new economy thereby creating disparities in employment and income. Overall, the digital divide worsens the existing inequalities of developed and developing countries. While developed countries enjoy the advantages of well-advanced digital systems, most developing countries are still even battling to login with the internet denying them an opportunity to be active players in the global innovational digital economy. To illustrate these divisions and their significance for inequality at global level, case studies and empirical data are used. The paper ends with a call for change stating local governments, the business community and international institutions should collaborate towards eliminating the digital divide. This paper highlights the importance of addressing digital inequities in order to achieve a more inclusive digital future.

Keywords

Digital Divide, Social Mobility, Digital Inequalities, Technology Access, Digital Literacy.

Resumo

A clivagem digital, diferenciada pelas desigualdades no acesso, nas competências e na utilização social da tecnologia, tornou-se um obstáculo significativo à mobilidade social, agravando ainda mais as disparidades atuais nos domínios económico, social e educativo. O objetivo desta investigação é explicar como a falta de recursos digitais é mais onerosa para a população empobrecida, negando-lhe oportunidades de melhorar a sua situação económica. A exploração aborda os componentes da exclusão digital, nomeadamente: acesso a dispositivos, competências tecnológicas e utilização efetiva do equipamento, mostrando ao mesmo tempo o impacto de longo alcance que estas relações têm na educação, no emprego e no desenvolvimento económico. Os estudantes de regiões subdesenvolvidas não conseguem aceder às plataformas online que disponibilizam materiais de aprendizagem digital, resultando numa maior disparidade no nível de educação. Da mesma forma, os baixos níveis de literacia no que diz respeito à utilização da tecnologia moderna, bem como a discriminação contra aqueles que não têm acesso a essa tecnologia, desencorajam as pessoas de se envolverem na nova economia, criando assim disparidades no emprego e no rendimento. Em geral, a exclusão digital agrava as desigualdades existentes entre países desenvolvidos e em desenvolvimento. Enquanto os países desenvolvidos desfrutam das vantagens de sistemas digitais bem avançados, a maioria dos países em desenvolvimento ainda luta para se conectar à Internet, negando-lhes a oportunidade de serem participantes ativos na economia digital inovadora global. Para ilustrar essas divisões e sua importância para a desigualdade em nível global, são utilizados estudos de caso e dados empíricos. O artigo termina com um apelo à mudança, afirmando que os governos locais, a comunidade empresarial e as instituições internacionais devem colaborar para eliminar a exclusão digital. Este artigo destaca a importância de abordar as desigualdades digitais para alcançar um futuro digital mais inclusivo.

Palavras-chave

Clivagem digital, mobilidade social, desigualdades digitais, acesso à tecnologia, literacia digital.

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Introduction

The digital divide has emerged as one of the most concerning issues in the 21st century as people and societies advance and strive to benefit from the web. It is possible to identify attempts on a global level to use technology, however, there is still an inadequate access to digital tools which prevents several communities from growing economically and socially (Warschauer, 2004). This phenomenon is pronounced for the low-income groups. This research seeks to analyse the underlying factors of the digital divide while focusing on its impact on social mobility and inequality around the world. In this regard, the study is expected to fill in the gaps and suggest measures that can reduce the existing inequity in the digital world.

1.1 Background of the Study

Technology has ushered in a new era that has transformed societal structures (Castells, 2009). Individuals can now communicate with one another more rapidly and efficiently. Digital tools have expanded the domains of governance, healthcare, education, and employment. However, not all individuals have benefited from these advancements. The disparity between individuals who own technological devices and those who lack them is referred to as the "digital divide." This division manifests in various forms, such as device ownership, internet accessibility, and technological proficiency. Financial constraints, inadequate system configurations, and a lack of leadership focus have exacerbated this disparity (Norris, 2001). This has excluded numerous individuals from the information. We must critically examine the persistent occurrences of this inequity. This encompasses the disparate access to technology that exacerbates existing inequities.

1.2 Definition of the Digital Divide

The term ‘digital divide’ entails inequalities in terms of possession, accessibility, and mastery in the use of technology. It is usually described in three categories: the Access Divide, which points out the lack of equity and equality in the possession of devices and internet; the Skills Divide, which indicates the different level of expertise of people in the use of digital devices; and the Usage Divide, which includes the theory of differences in the application of technology for socio-economic purposes and to what extent it is applied. These divides taken together define whether individuals and communities are included in the digital economy, education, and governance.

1.3 Importance of Social Mobility in Reducing Inequalities

Social mobility is the progress of societal agents or groups within socio-economic structures and is thus an important part of reducing equity gaps. The means through which technology can assist social mobility is in the field of imparting resources related to education, skills, and employment. Segments of society unserved by the technology will find themselves in much greater difficulties because of a lack of access to such forms of education. For instance, lack of availability of online educational resources has exacerbated the disparities in educational opportunities and fewer education services mean fewer job opportunities as well. Bridging the gap in digital resources should be made a priority in increasing social mobility while constructing a fair society in which access to opportunities is not determined by social, economic, or geographical factors (Warschauer, 2004).

1.4 Objectives of the Study

The study aims to:

1. Investigate the impact of the digital divide on education, employment, and economic development.
2. Examine global disparities between developed and developing nations in terms of digital access.
3. Propose actionable recommendations for bridging the digital divide to promote social mobility and inclusivity.

1.5 Research Questions

1. What are the primary components of the digital divide, and how do they interact?
2. How does unequal access to technology affect educational and employment outcomes?
3. What role does the digital divide play in perpetuating global disparities between developed and developing nations?
4. How can collaborative efforts between governments, businesses, and international organizations create a more inclusive digital ecosystem?

1.6 Research Methodology and Case Selection Rationale

This study employs a qualitative approach using a comparative case study methodology to scrutinize the impact of the digital divide phenomena on social mobility across different socio-economic and geopolitical contexts. The comparative approach helps to holistically understand the disparities regarding the availability of the digital resources, skills, and infrastructure and their educational, occupational, and economic outcome impacts across various societies. In order to maintain methodological rigor and increase the overall analysis of the inquiry, the three case studies—India, South Korea, and Sub-Saharan Africa—were selected according to a pre-determined set of criteria. First, the cases have

been chosen with regard to differing levels of digital exclusion which were measured using internet coverage, availability of ICT infrastructure, and digital literacy levels. Sub-Saharan Africa exemplifies acute digital deprivation; India reflects an intermediary position with substantial internal disparities; and South Korea represents a digitally advanced society with near-universal access (James, 2020). Second, the selection considers comparative developmental positioning, encompassing low-, middle-, and high-income economies enabling a gradient assessment of the impacts of the digital divide. Third, all cases are found to differ greatly in their policy and institutional responses to digital inequality, ranging from strong and sustained interventions in South Korea and uneven emerging initiatives in India and many Sub-Saharan countries (Couldry & Mejias, 2021). The integration of these criteria allows for an assessment of the quad reform factors of infrastructure, technology, policy impact, and their interactions with digital inequality and its multi-faceted socio-economic impacts. The analysis is based on a range of primary data such as official documents, and reports of socio-economic development. Such an approach enhances the practical scope of the investigation while at the same time increases the degree of theoretical applicability of the results to situations characterized by different levels of digital development of the society under study. The analysis of the programs is useful in that it offers a comparative perspective, but it is also clear within the study that the absence of longitudinal data is a major limitation. A number of initiatives, such as the Digital India Programme, are new and thus do not allow for an assessment of their lasting impacts on social mobility. This changing phenomenon limits the ability to make firm judgments about lasting benefits in other areas.

2. Components of the Digital Divide

2.1 Access to Devices and Infrastructure: The Foundational Divide

Proficiency towards the use of technology starts from the ownership of devices such as tablets, laptops, and smartphones, status along with a good connection to the internet services. The gap between the urban and rural areas encompasses the affordability of these devices and a properly developed infrastructure that provides connectivity, especially in the developing countries (Van Dijk, 2020). To exemplify, around big cities there may be strong well-functioning internet and broadband lines, while huts in rural areas are still struggling for strong lines. And social factors make matters worse, as those who earn little cannot buy the new technology, which widens even more the disparity between haves and have nots (Norris, 2001).

2.2 Digital Literacy and Technology Skills: Enabling Competence

Conditions of Enablement Owning an internet enabled gadget is not a sufficient condition to ensure full digital participation. The ability to competently utilize technology as mentioned, is a critical element of the divide. Having capabilities like internet and digital communications are fundamental yet multiple people are lacking even those (Helsper, 2021). Moreover, operating and analysing software, which are vital skills in the contemporary workplace, are considered ‘advanced competencies’ and once again, many people, unfortunately, are missing these advanced skills as well. In addition, generational divides often are part of the problem too, given that the elder population is notoriously

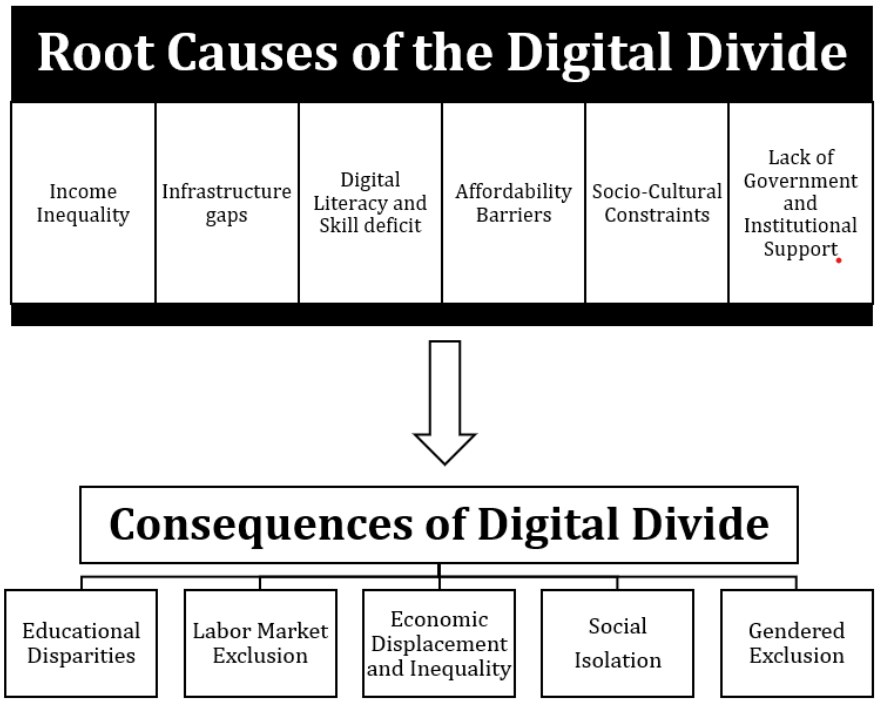
slow to adopt new apparatuses (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, Robinson., 2001). The problems posed are deep, particularly in the context of education and training strategies, ensuring that without such plans, the existing skill gaps would remain and so would the socioeconomic divides in communities and groups (Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2022; Schou & Hjelholt, 2019).

2.3 Patterns of Technology Usage and Access: Unequal Benefits

The most glaring example of the digital divide is in relation to technology usage, and even if the skill set in using technology is taken into consideration, such disparities remain. For some people, technology is a tool for learning, acquiring new skills, or conducting business; for others, it is limited as entertainment tool (Gunkel, 2003). Gender and other social factors, such as discrimination against certain groups within society, tend to create barriers to achieving this goal and therefore technologies are not universally adopted. Furthermore, the relatively high price of more advanced digital services constrains their use among poor people (Ragnedda & Muschert, 2013). To address such gaps, technology users need that additional support in the form of equitable access and development of the basic skills needed to use the technology to the fullest extent (Pearce & Rice, 2017).

3. Impact of the Digital Divide on Key Areas

Figure 1



3.1 Education and Digital Learning Inequalities

Education is one of the most affected realms due to the divide, it is worth noting that it has become increasingly difficult to pursue any form of learning without the aid of some modern resources. In many countries, especially those that are underdeveloped, students do not have access to the basic aspects that would allow them to thrive in a digital learning environment which includes, computers, tablets, smartphones and internet connections. Consequently, during the COVID-19 pandemic as students were instructed to attend classes virtually, students who belonged from low-income families, or lived in rural areas were unable to participate in classes due to the lack of basic resources such as stable internet connection (Selwyn, 2016; Warschauer, 2018).

Barriers to accessing digital learning platforms go beyond just access to devices. Apart from the accessibility of devices, several other factors like, lack of sufficient locally relevant digital content, a poor rate of digital literacy education of teachers, minimal investment on the part of the government into school digital infrastructure create a vicious educational inequality cycle where tech driven economy skills and knowledge becomes unattainable to poor segments of society (Warschauer, 2004). Without removing these barriers, the aim of ameliorating the educational divide and thereby enhancing equal opportunities will remain a lofty dream.

3.2 Employment and Economic Disparities

The unemployment problem is aggravated by the absence of digital skills for a digitalized society especially where people lack any digital training. Digitization of the 21st century has made it a necessity that you are able to operate digital equipment and manoeuvre various online sites which is a core requirement for many jobs. Unfortunately, such training opportunities especially for the less privileged are very limited making skill acquisition difficult. Lacking these skills makes attaining well-paying jobs in the finance, technology, e commerce and other related high demands industries unattainable (Rainie & Anderson, 2017). Moreover, the digitally disadvantaged are discriminated in the employment arena. A very few employers often accept those who are qualified but do not possess the digital credibility, whereas, in times of selection, the ones who are more qualified are selected with the acceptance of possessing the required qualifications (Schradie, 2019). As a result, you are placed within a vicious cycle. For example, if a person cannot get into the digital economy, he/she will be further excluded. The situation is exacerbated in the developing countries where digital economies are too aspiring, but low literacy levels and poor infrastructure prevent a large chunk from entering such economies. Such economic displacement forebodes ill as they lead to inequality and reduce social mobility over time.

3.3 Economic Development and Global Disparities

Closely linked with economic development from the perspective of both national and international economic development, the digital divide has some vague propositions. There are nations developed socio-economically in all things technological. Such nations have the requisite digital infrastructure to enable levels and standards of education for

digital literacy from within their family groups (Castells, 2009). On the other hand, developing countries lack exactly what is required. More often than not, a great deal of this boils down to factors like lack of access to broadband internet, infrastructural development to enable the incorporation of digital technology, and that is on top of other aspects relevant to agriculture, healthcare, and education. That is where this inequality in access combines with practically equal levels of economic disparity between states. For instance, underdeveloped resource-based countries with poorly built digital infrastructure are unable to access the international digital markets or participate in global value chains. They are unable to take advantage of the recent technologies such as Artificial Intelligence and Blockchain, and Big Data Analytics since it does not help increase productivity levels and support the country's needs for better public services, where the need arises for foreign investments to stimulate the market. Such a degree of deprived capacity, education, and technology leads directly to low levels of innovation and entrepreneurship in developing nations (Ragnedda & Muschert, 2013). Filling the distance made by lack of resources directing toward technology remains a formidable challenge approached toward attaining sustainable economic growth in which every state leverage technology.

4. Case Studies and Empirical Evidence

4.1 Analysis of Education Inequalities in Developing Regions

Among poorer parts of the world, the extent of educational inequalities caused by the digital divide is considerable (Selwyn, 2014). According to the UNESCO (2021) report, there were over millions of students globally who were affected by school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact was felt disproportionately by students from developing nations. As an example, sub-Saharan Africa had thousands of pupils who were excluded from having the opportunity to participate in remote learning due to lack of electricity. The case of India highlights another discrepancy. Rural areas were in dire need of resources when students attending urban areas made an entirely effective shift to remote learning. More than 80% of rural India households lack access to the internet, as pointed out by an annual report status about education (ASER) in 2021 which demonstrates millions of schools going children not having access to effective educational resources. Moreover, the absence of affordable devices deepened the disparity and escalated the already existing education gap between the rural and urban learners. Such case is a true depiction of the need to invest in equal access to resources and digital infrastructure in learning environments.

4.2 Employment Gaps as a Result of the Digital Divide

The International Labour Organization had a study in 2020 which shows how the divide caused by technological innovations widened the gap in employment opportunities, especially between developed and developing nations. Low-income countries had only 17% of the workers able to secure remote jobs while more than 40% of high-income countries' workers were able to land a remote job. These numbers are a representation of how the shift in availability of technology healthcare workers in less privileged countries are unable to enjoy the benefits of remote employment. In South Africa for

instance, broadband internet penetration is at a woeful 10%, denying most job seekers the ability to apply for jobs or take part in online skills development courses (Rainie & Anderson, 2017). This is also the case in Latin America, where women do not participate in the workforce as much as men due to skills training and devices being out of reach. These instances serve as a reminder of how the digital divide contributes to existing structural inequities in labour markets, further diminishing social mobility opportunities (Graham & Dutton, 2019; Castells, 2010).

4.3 Global Comparisons: Success Stories and Ongoing Issues

On a global scale, some countries have shown great improvement in addressing the digital divide while the challenge remains for other regions. South Korea represents a success story after almost all its citizens gained access to the internet, coupled with a strong digital literacy policy due to large government funding (Van Dijk, 2020). South Korean students have been able to get access to modern education materials through advanced government policies, which ensures the country has a technologically savvy population.

On the other hand, Nigeria and Bangladesh are still grappling with these issues. Over fifty percent of the Nigerian populace do not have dependable internet access, resulting in poor engagement with the digital sphere (Ragnedda & Muschert, 2013). In Bangladesh, there has been some progress in mobile connectivity but the low-income families cannot afford the devices and services, limiting their ability to use educational and employment resources.

These worldwide comparisons illustrate that even though investments in technology and policies can greatly help to solve the digital divide, socio-economic and physical barriers should be tackled in a structured manner for people to have the opportunity to access technology globally.

5. Drivers and Barriers to Bridging the Digital Divide

Figure 2

Country	Policy Intervention	Primary Focus	Funding Sources	Outcomes
South Korea	Digital Literacy & Broadband Expansion	Infrastructure, Literacy	Government investment	Near-universal high-speed internet.
India	Digital India & BharatNet	Infrastructure, Affordability	Government funding	Expanded rural broadband access.
United States	Emergency Broadband Benefit	Affordability, Access	Federal subsidies	Increased low-income broadband access.
Kenya	Rural Internet Partnerships	Infrastructure, Affordability	Government + international agencies	Improved rural internet penetration.

5.1 Policy Interventions and Government Initiatives

Existing governments can substantially contribute towards bridging the digital divide through specific policies and investment in infrastructure. Thus, many countries have developed national strategies to improve digital access and literacy (Norris, 2001). One such effort is the Digital India Initiative, which seeks to strengthen online infrastructure, enhance the connectivity of the population in India, and utilize technology to enable citizens' empowerment. As part of this program, government projects like BharatNet are indeed aimed at broadband connectivity to more than 250000 rural villages. In the same manner, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in the United States set up the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program, which provides low-income families with subsidies to pay for broadband internet services and devices. In Kenya, the government joined efforts with certain international agencies to bring cheap internet solutions to rural parts of the country, which has vastly improved the level of access in these regions. These measures highlight the potential of government strategies in promoting digital inclusion. Yet, there are still many countries where scarce resources, red tape, and political volatility weaken these policies' potential effectiveness (Castells, 2009).

5.2 Role of Private Sector and Technology Companies

The need for a robust response from the private sector, and especially from technology companies, is even more crucial in providing solutions to the digital divide. Google, Microsoft and many other companies have created initiatives to address world connectivity. For example, Google's Project Loon employed the use of high-altitude balloons to offer internet services to remote places, while Microsoft's Airband Initiative works with local organizations to increase broadband coverage in rural areas of Africa and North America (Rainie & Anderson, 2017). The aforementioned factors, including investment by the private sector in low-cost technologies and digital skills training, have been remarkable. Let us take two examples, the corporate schools offered by IBM and Cisco which teach coding and related IT skills to those on the fringes of society. In some instances, private sector firms have also provided other devices like tablets and laptops to enhance usability. Still, profit motives and market-driven strategies may leave the poorest out, making it important for the private sector to take these steps within the context of broader social inclusion strategies.

5.3 Socio-Cultural and Economic Barriers

Social, cultural and economic barriers, however, still stand in the way of efforts aimed at addressing the digital divide owing to the existing technological and policy gaps. Biases directed towards the vulnerable, in the form of women, ethnic groups and the poor, serve to deepen the digital gap. For example, within the cultural context of many developing nations, women's access to technology is limited breaking the women's digital divide. A GSMA (2021) report notes that women from low to middle-income earning nations are less likely by 15% to use mobile internet as compared to men. The costs of devices and internet services are economic barriers that, to a great extent, affect the situation with digital divide. In contrast, these devices and connectivity is unaffordable for the general population in Nigeria and Bangladesh (Helsper, 2021). In addition, windows of

opportunity that these affected groups can avail is blocked by the insufficient levels of digital literacy. Overcoming these barriers requires a combination of policies aimed at improving education access or providing direct subsidies or countering discriminatory practices to expand equality of access to digital communication technology usage (Sen, 1999).

6. Collaborative Efforts for a Digital Future

6.1 Role of Local Governments in Digital Inclusion

Since local governments are nearest to the most impacted population groups, they are well placed to promote and implement solutions targeted to specific areas for improved digital inclusion. Enhanced accessibility has the potential to be achieved through local government investments in projects geared towards improving the digital infrastructure like the installation of high-speed internet, as well as for paying subsidies for the devices and for the connection. For instance, municipal governments in Barcelona and Stockholm city have instituted initiatives such as free public Wi-Fi and programs to promote digital literacy for disadvantaged groups, provided within the framework of smart cities (Castells, 2009). Local government is equally important to the integration of technology into the educational systems. KITE (Kerala Infrastructure and Technology for Education) in India is one example of how local governments could equip learners and instructors with relevant digital equipment and their training (Warschauer, 2004). Additionally, public information campaigns can help eliminate cultural barriers to technology use and motivate women and other rural populations to adopt new technologies. But, with limited budgets and poor administrative capacity, local governments often find it hard to accomplish their objectives which highlights the importance of achieving those goals through coordination from other levels of government.

6.2 International Institutions and Global Policies

Global institutions like the United Nations, World Bank and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) are immensely important towards building collaboration on a global level to address the existing digital divide. They assist different countries in increasing their digital reach by providing funding, expert guidance, and help in drafting policies. For instance, the focus of the United Nations sustainable development goal 9 targets infrastructure development and innovation, with a particular focus on the goal of providing affordable internet access for all citizens by 2030.

Partnerships such as the World Bank's Digital Development Partnership help developing countries improve their digital infrastructure, boost cybersecurity, and foster diverse digital economies (Norris, 2001). The ITU also works with its member countries to ensure universal connectivity and the basic requirement of digital literacy under its Connect 2030 Agenda. However, doing this is often hampered in regions roiled with conflict or that are politically fragile due to the global imbalances of funding and a lack of political willingness (Van Dijk, 2020). Increasing the collaborative efforts of national policies with international institutions can help augment the outcome of such initiatives.

6.3 Public-Private Partnerships in Technology Accessibility

Mobilizing resources, skills, and creativity from the public and private sector through PPPs helps reduce the digital divide swiftly. The combination of skills from governments and the private sector enables PPPs to address challenges like expensive infrastructure, lack of affordable devices, and low digital literacy. A great example is the partnership between Google and the Indian government under the Google Internet Saathi program, which trained over 30 million rural women in digital skills and provided them with tools to access the internet.

Furthermore, we can observe that the government has partnered with companies like Microsoft and Facebook to increase internet coverage in difficult areas. Both Microsoft and Facebook contributed in different but overlapping ways: Facebook created the spatially cheaper Express Wi-Fi program, while Microsoft focused on projects like the Airband Initiative, which aims to spread broadband access to remote areas in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Not only do these initiatives improve internet access, but they also foster economic development by employing local residents in their actualization. Despite their potential, public private partnerships are only as effective as the alignment between corporate goals and the public interest (Fuchs, 2014). Private companies focus more on profit margins while the government is tasked with making sure that these partnerships seek to include a higher number of people.

A cross-national comparative analysis of both successful and struggling initiatives reveals a more complex understanding of policy efficacy in relation to the digital divide. Take South Korea, for instance, whose government broadband expansion is often touted as a model of success due to extensive government spending, strategic public-private partnerships, and a comprehensive digital policy blueprint. On the other hand, India's BharatNet project is marred by chronic delays resulting from administrative backlogs, poor inter-agency coordination, and infrastructural issues relating to rural deployment. These two examples vividly highlight the burden of governance un-sustained by funding transparency and policy flexibility responsiveness at subnational levels. Moreover, while it may be argued that public-private partnerships enable agile scaling of digital infrastructure, their associated costs are frequently overlooked. The alternative, though, raises the flag that unregulated access models driven by profit can disproportionately marginalize other populations while commercially oversaturating non-essential services. Ignoring these changes within inclusion policies risks creating technically efficient algorithms but socially inequitable outcomes through a democratically unaccountable framework.

7. Recommendations

7.1 Policy-Level Recommendations

1. Universal Broadband Access

Decision-makers need to work on building broadband infrastructure such that it is affordable and accessible, especially in the rural areas. Like in South Korea and some parts of the European Union, universal broadband initiatives should be with the goal of treating internet connectivity as a public amenity. This requires investment in broadband

technology. To reach remote areas where cable infrastructure is impossible, satellites and fibre-optic networks must be put in place. These policies must set affordability targets and build incentives for broadband service providers to expand their coverage to the neglected areas.

2. Device and Internet Connectivity Subsidies

Governments should, for instance, establish subsidy programs to enable people from low-income families to pay for digital devices and the internet. These programs could facilitate offering low-cost laptops, tablets, and even mobile phones, as well as providing financial assistance for internet service plans. For example, voucher programs that subsidize the purchase of devices or discounted internet rates for low-income families would greatly enhance technology penetration. This would minimize the disparity in access to digital tools between the haves and have-nots.

3. Plans for Promoting Digital Equity

Digital equity plans should also define specific objectives, and targets for actions and programs that have clear timelines at the local and national levels. These plans should also have geographical based approaches that consider the gaps that exist in digital infrastructure especially for rural, remote, and economically disadvantaged places. Digital equity should be integrated into the development plans of countries, and will make sure no group is disenfranchised in the digital economy. The progress towards achieving the objectives and the policies put in place to bridge the digital divide will require regular monitoring, reporting, and modifications to the plans.

4. Public-Private Partnerships

In the area of resource mobilization and expertise, public-private partnerships are crucial for addressing issues of digital inclusion. The government should work together with private sector businesses, especially those in technology, in order to design and implement large projects that seek to enhance the availability of the internet and improve digital skills. These PPPs enable government to benefit from the innovation and funding available in the private sector while at the same time keeping the public concern in view. For instance, PPP can be successful when the governments and tech firms collaborate to build affordable internet infrastructure in the underserved rural locations or when they employ teachers and students in the digital training process. These partnerships can also encourage the development of cheap educational devices and digital tools.

5. Strengthen Data Protection Policies

The relevance of data protection and privacy together with cybersecurity cannot be overstated as digital platforms continue to evolve. It is the prerogative of governments to apply suitable measures and frameworks to guarantee that confidential consumer information is protected, particularly for user groups that are considered vulnerable. Legislations which comply with the privacy standards set by the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) ought to be adopted in other jurisdictions (Zuboff, 2019). Equally important, cyber security regulations should be revised on a regular basis to keep up with new challenges and to increase confidence in the digital environment. Effective data protection will enable users to access the digital economy without fear of being exploited or fraudulent.

7.2 Educational Initiatives for Digital Literacy

1. Incorporate Digital Literacy into School Curricula

Every student is expected to be proficient with modern technologies therefore, digital literacy must be integrated into the school syllabus from the earliest years possible (Buckingham, 2008). Students not only have to learn how to use technological devices but also how to analyse the information presented to them and interact in a healthy manner with the online community. This entails teaching students how to properly exercise digital citizenship, remain safe online, and abide by the principles of technology use. Moreover, schools should also have practical programs where students learn how to use computers and software applications, as well as the internet. Such endeavours will help to prepare the future generations for participation in the digital economy and enhance their ability to leverage technology positively for their personal and career development.

2. Teacher Training Programs

Teachers' use of technology is an important factor when considering how best to integrate digital literacy instruction in the teaching. Government and educational institutions need to run professional development programs for teachers to broaden their understanding of the use of digital tools and methodologies. This training has to go beyond just administrative uses of technology, to include digital tools for teaching and learning processes. Teachers must have the requisite skills to support students to use technology for research, communication, and other creative activities. With proper training, teachers will be able to use their professional skills to engage students and promote critical thinking through the use of technology.

3. Accessible Digital Learning Platforms

Governments and educational institutions need to make an effort on making education digital learning platforms that are accessible to every student regardless of their socio-economic status. These platforms ought to include a variety of educational resources such as textbooks, videos, and tutorials all in different languages as well as different types of media. Equally important is the screen technology for disabilities, where students can simply have all written material read out to them. Also, these platforms ought to be lower end device friendly. These new platforms might serve as online learning centres which provide both formal and informal education to everyone regardless of their age enabling them to learn new skills as new opportunities become available.

4. Promote Public Access to Learning Tools

Access to digital materials is a challenge for numerous students who cannot afford them; in order to address these issues, public learning tools should be made available at social institutions like public libraries and community centres. Furthermore, Public Access Places should allow students and other users to access computers, tablets, and other resources with high-speed internet so that they can enhance their education and build skills. Such centres could also arrange workshops in which use of digital devices could be taught which would enable more people to access education digitally. This would in turn provide opportunities to those who do not have the necessary resources to learn new skills.

5. Scholarships and Grants for Digital Access

To provide equal opportunity for all students, it is essential to combat the imbalance of access to modern technology and the internet by providing financial support for students in need (Sen, 1999). As well as governments, private companies can also help by providing grants and low interest loans to underprivileged students, so that they can obtain devices or internet connections. These funds should be limited to students coming from low socio-economic backgrounds or those belonging to the underprivileged sections of the society. These initiatives will provide opportunities for the underprivileged sections of the society and work towards a more equal education.

7.3 Grassroots Innovations and Community-Based Solutions

1. Community Digital Literacy Campaigns

Digital literacy campaigns cantered on basic internet and computer skills along with online safety need to be initiated by local governments in conjunction with local organizations. Such initiatives need to be tailored around the needs of the communities with a focus on disadvantaged groups including the elderly in rural areas, and women (Tapscott, 2009). With the assistance of established community leaders and organizations, these campaigns can be optimized to reach the illiterate population. For instance, the use of workshops, mobile learning centres, and community radio can promote the training of essential digital skills and garner appreciation of its importance.

2. Empowering Local Entrepreneurs in Technology

Local entrepreneurs have the potential to play an important role towards bridging the digital divide. There is a need for NGOs and governments to support programs that assist the growth of local technology startups, especially those that cater to affordable and relevant technological needs (Fuchs, 2014). As an example, local entrepreneurs can manufacture inexpensive smartphones, establish solar powered internet access points, and create applications designed to resolve region-specific issues. This type of aid not only encourages innovative strategies in local business problem solving but also ensures that digital solutions meet the specific needs of the community.

3. Creating Internet Networks That Are Community-Centric

Sometimes, areas where conventional internet services tend to ignore, community-based internet networks fill that gap. These internet systems are usually created and managed by local citizens through resource sharing as mesh networks or through community-owned wireless systems (Van Dijk, 2020). Such systems are crucial in rural and remote areas where affordable internet is not accessible. They should be encouraged and supported by the Government through financial, technical, and regulatory assistance. These community-driven local efforts will be key in reaching those populations that are mostly without internet services.

4. Ensuring Inclusivity within Digital Solutions

The importance of developing programs tailored for the requirements of social groups with greater barriers to use such technologies ' digital solutions is paramount to ensure that all members within the society are able to access such programs. Programs aimed

at increasing digital access should give preference to the inclusion of women, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and other underprivileged groups (Ragnedda & Muschert, 2013). For instance, it is necessary to create easy-to-use digital content for persons with disabilities, to train women in technology, or construct other digital tools for refugees. Such measures help build inclusivity while fostering equal measures in access to technology as well as meeting the cultural limitations.

5. Collaborative Resource Sharing Platforms

In an effort to augment bridging the digital gap, community and business models can be structured towards creating 'device, internet access, and skills sharing' platforms that can help those who need them the most. For example, pedagogic device donations can be made through businesses and individuals seeking to give away old or unused devices to schools, libraries, or community centres. Such platforms could also include sharing educational materials like e-books, online courses, and software tools as well, diminishing the opportunities gap between the affluent and marginalized. Promoting the community to be part of these initiatives can foster a sense of responsibility and unity towards overcoming digital divide.

8. Conclusion

To summarize, the absence of equal access to technology continues to act as an impediment to social equity, affecting the availability of educational, job, and health services. The evidence illustrates that the lack of access to technology, the skills to use it, and the necessary infrastructure is a complex issue that stems from socio-economic and spatial considerations. These issues have to be solved through a combined effort by the entire world together with the appropriate actions from governments, businesses, and community leaders so that everyone irrespective of their class has access to the means and knowledge needed to be active users of technology. Going forward, it is important for subsequent works to analyse the current interventions aimed at increasing digital inclusion, develop new solutions to increase coverage, and determine the effects of enhanced access to technology on the previously disadvantaged groups in the society. Evidence-based strategies for closing these gaps are required in order to promote inclusiveness and sustainable development in the digital age.

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