

GENERAL ESSAY 2020

Pandemics and Digital Divide

Digital divide refers to the gap between those with regular, effective access to digital and information technology, and those without this access. It encompasses both physical access to technology hardware and, more broadly, skills and resources which allow for its use. Factors like gender, physical disability, physical access, age, access to the contents, and lack of ICT skills contribute to the digital divide.

Digital divide arises because of disparities due to geography, race, economic status, gender and physical ability in access to information through the Internet, and other information technologies and services; and in the skills, knowledge, and abilities to use information, the Internet and other technologies.

The phrase “digital divide” refers to the unequal and disproportionate pace of development in societies in having access to digital infrastructure and services.

As far as India is concerned the following factors can be considered barrier to the digital divide:

Low Literacy Rate: Urban- rural difference in the literacy rate which in turn creates a hurdle for digital divide.

Education System: In order to overcome the digital divide it is necessary that the information technology aspect should be introduced to the students right from their school level.

Language familiarity with English

In 2014, the Indian government launched the Digital India initiative, which aimed to boost the country’s physical digital infrastructure, and shift government services online. Broadband would reach 250,000 villages; wi-fi would reach

250,000 schools; and a push would be made towards both universal phone connectivity and universal digital literacy. While half of all Indian men have a mobile phone, fewer than one in three women have one.

Two main features of India's digital divide:

First is the urban-rural divide: around half of urban households have internet access, far in excess of their compatriots in the countryside.

Second is the gender divide: while half of all Indian men have a mobile phone, fewer than one in three women have one. Plus, in some rural areas, females are banned by community leaders from using mobile phones. This gap between men and women goes much deeper than mobile phone ownership or internet access. In some key areas, women still lag men in India. The Literacy Rate census in 2011 found that the female literacy rate was 65.5%, compared to 80% for men. Almost a quarter of girls have already left school before they even reach puberty. In short, many females are currently still on the wrong side of the digital divide.

However, given India's tremendous scale, further steps to bridge the divide for women will unlock a rich area of potential in the coming decade.

'India's Trillion-Dollar Digital economy', a new report by the Government of India's Ministry for Electronics and Information Technology (MEITY), takes stock of the massive digitally-enabled change that is underway and lays out a vision and roadmap for the coming years.

India has nearly half a billion internet users and their number is rising rapidly in every part of the country. This will create a huge market for a host of digital services, platforms, applications, content, and solutions. Overall, India could potentially see a five-fold increase in economic value from digital transformation by 2025, representing an attractive opportunity for global and local businesses, start-ups, and

innovators to invest in emerging technologies (like AI, blockchain, or drones) in ways that are customized to India's needs.

There is a "glaring" need to bridge the digital divide, both within and across countries, as the digital economy has played a key role during the current COVID-19 crisis, according to a report by the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

The report has argued that the experiences and lessons emerging from the COVID-19 crisis could be a further incentive for global cooperation in the area of e-commerce, which could help to facilitate cross-border movement of goods and services, narrow the digital divide, and level the playing field for small businesses.

It said certain traditional obstacles have been accentuated and have continued to hamper greater participation in e-commerce activities by small producers, sellers and consumers in developing countries, particularly in least-developed countries (LDCs).

Several other e-commerce-related challenges have arisen or been further amplified during this pandemic such as increasing prices to unreasonably high levels, product safety concerns, deceptive practices, and cybersecurity concerns, the report said.

It, however, said the enforcement of social distancing, lockdowns and other measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has led consumers to ramp up online shopping, social media use, internet telephony and teleconferencing, and streaming of videos and films. It said that demand has also increased for internet and mobile data services.

It added that the pandemic has made it clear that e-commerce can be an important tool or solution for consumers. However, the interests of traditional kirana shops should be protected along with those of the MSMEs.