

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

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Many academics believe that if internet is used and acquired to its full potential it can create a large-scale social and economic change, both at the national as well as global level. With internet, access opportunities in terms of communication, education, and human relationships can be generated easily, which can become challenging otherwise. However, the proliferation of internet is not an easy task and is subjected to a range of issues, especially in the developing world. One of such issues is the digital divide.

Digital divide explains that there is a restriction when it comes to the proliferation of information among people which creates the social and economic gap. Most people think that the digital divide is merely the lack of internet access, but in reality, it also includes issues like people who have internet connection but lack the skills and devices to operate it. It also comprises how information is collected and if the people who gather certain information from the internet can interpret it or not.

The digital divide is a global phenomenon. The use of the internet and its restriction is different for different countries, based on their legal and political environment. The global disparities in terms of digital divide are primarily between developed and developing countries. The internet service all around the world are expanding in an exceedingly swift manner, but most of the developing countries have a different story to tell. It is pertinent to note that digital divide across the globe does not necessarily mean the non-availability of the internet, it also means that the

technology is different in different regions. This uneven distribution of internet across globe causes disparities in terms of education, labor, technology, opportunities etc. Western democratic regimes are more open to the idea of internet accessibility as compared to other governance models. In western democracies, people have far greater freedom to access information and there is almost no restriction on the use of the internet. On the other hand, many developing countries and authoritarian regimes have limited internet access - one of the key reasons behind the huge digital gap in these countries. It is imperative to tackle this internet disparity, so that the issue of digital divide can be mitigated sooner than later.

Moreover, with the advent of telecommunication services, the proliferation of information has become an easier task. Owing to the huge demand for the internet and computers, many countries are working to improve their ICT (Information and Communications Technology) - based programs. Many academics believe that augmenting ICT is very critical as it helps to remove barriers in society and promotes social connectivity and inclusiveness. In Pakistan, for the last five years, government has been trying to integrate ICT across many sectors of the economy. However, the number of internet users is still very less as compared to other countries. One of the main reasons behind this is the limited access to internet services in certain areas of Pakistan. This creates a digital divide, creating social inequalities which can surge with time if sufficient steps for internet provision across the country are not taken well in time.

Certain crucial factors behind this digital gap include a high tax on internet services, mediocre quality of internet, restrictions grounded in culture and societal norms. Increased taxes make it difficult to afford Wi-Fi or 4G network; whereas, companies are also not able to afford better ICT services due to poor planning and policy of the government. Even if the internet is present, people are not educated or qualified enough to operate it. Rural women are often restricted from using internet, but it has more to do with the patriarchal customs that are at play in Pakistan.

It was thought that the digital divide could be tackled by the propagation of technology, and it is temporary, however, this is not the case. Certain factors that have influenced the use of the internet are cultural barriers, regulation, and censorship.

Furthermore, education plays a key role when it comes to digital divide. People who are educated are going to use the internet and internet devices more as compared to people who do not have proper access to education. This points out to the lack of digital skills which are required for proper usage of internet. Apart from education, income also plays a significant role in digital divide. Households with more income are likely to purchase better internet and internet devices as compared to households with lower income. In rural areas in general people have lower income and thus they are not much inclined to buy internet. This can also be linked to the investments made by telecommunication companies; such companies are more hesitant to make costly investments in

less developed areas, causing the quality of internet to deteriorate in such areas, which further causes digital divide. Apart from these factors gender, location, race, political and cultural attitudes have a significant impact on digital divide.

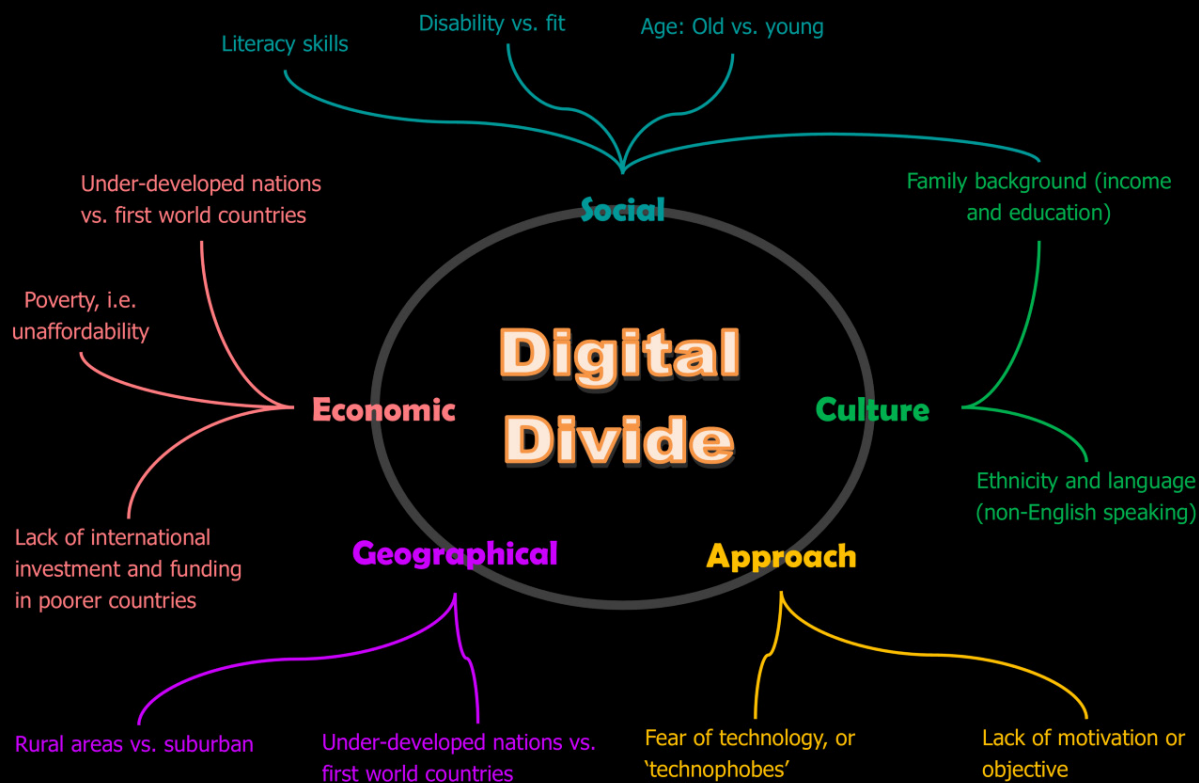
The internet plays a key role in the lives of people; it helps in creating opportunities for different people. Digital divide is a form of self-deprivation which can have adverse effects on any society. In Pakistan, the consequences of digital divide were noticed

during COVID-19 pandemic. Most people found it difficult to work from home pertaining to internet usage as well as connection issues. Students and teachers living in rural areas in Pakistan were unable to attend and deliver lectures due to poor internet connections and lack of skills required to operate internet. Similarly, businesses were also unable to operate optimally.

In parallel, digital divide is having a negative impact on worker's economy in Pakistan, people are unable to find quality jobs due to a lack of digital skills. In Pakistan,

limited access of internet hinders the opportunities for positive spill-over effects. This is causing divergence among the rich and poor.

In a crux, digital divide in Pakistan would eventually result in economic stagnation. Internet is particularly vital for productivity, development, and innovation while minimizing transaction cost. Hence, it is vital for the government to partner with the private sector and facilitate the provision of affordable internet across the country.



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