# Can the digital divide ever be breached?

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The internet age was seen as being full of potentials to reduce several inequalities that have plagued humanity since times immemorial. Almost every aspect of almost every society interacts with the internet in some way or the other. From daily appliances like refrigerators and lights to complex health care systems and record, most people encounter the internet on a daily basis. The easy access to services, including education and health care was seen as the biggest movement towards a better future. However, inequalities found their way even within the internet age, and the potentials of the internet continue getting marred by the mammoth digital divide. As prospects created by the internet increase, so do inequalities for those who do not have access to the technologies, tools or even skills needed to participate in the increasingly digital world. Roughly 2.7 billion people across the world are affected by the digital divide. Thus, about a third of the world does not have access to the internet. Further, 53% of the globe does not even have access to high speed broadband.
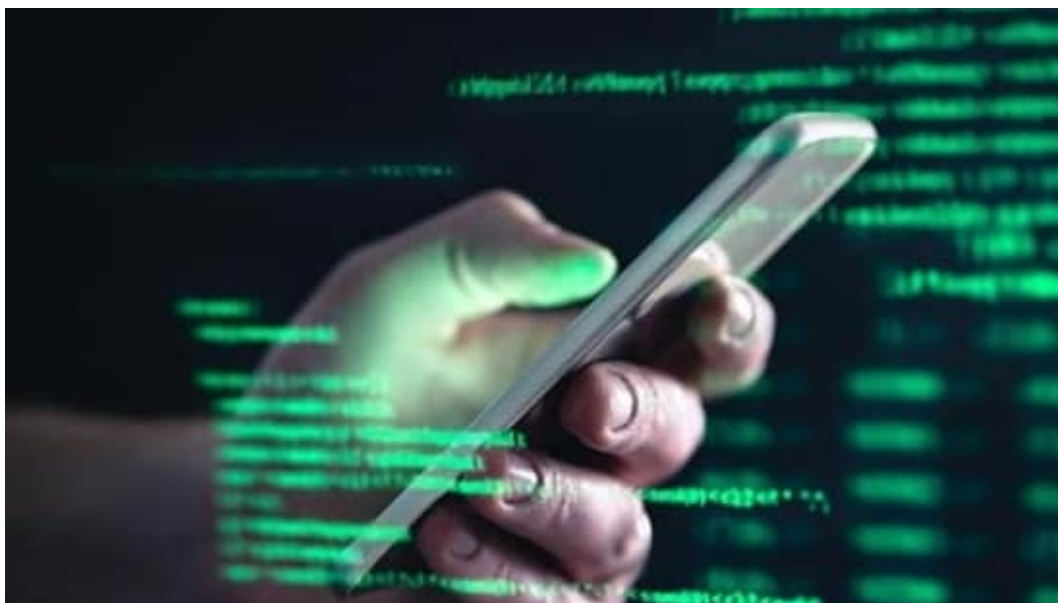


Digital World (Representative) (HT PHOTO)

This divide can negatively impact people's economic and professional developments and can lead to a cycle of marginalisation. Some of the factors that contribute to the digital divide include costs of the devices and internet services that become barriers for low income earners. Skills needed to access the technology create further divides as some people do not have the adequate knowledge or skills needed to use digital services and technologies. Lack of infrastructure to implement digital technologies make the divide gaping in certain areas. This is in addition to geographical restrictions that limit access to digital technologies. Further, it has also been found in several studies that women are often disproportionately affected by the digital divide.

Some countries that in their own ways have endeavored to reduce the digital divide include India, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Norway, Iceland and China. India is the third most digitised country in the world, and this is despite it having the world's largest population. Through programs such as the National Digital Literacy Mission, the Digital Saksharta Abhiyan and the Prime Minister Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan, there have been attempts to cater to the needs of different social groups. The BharatNet project aims at providing high-speed broadband to villages while Common Service Center networks provide offline internet access for e-governance services. Devices and internet services have also been made affordable in addition to promoting the development of local language content and applications. Nevertheless, the digital divide remains in several parts and operates on the lines of gender, geography, and age.

Netherlands, Switzerland and Norway, as of April 2024, have the highest internet penetration rates in the world, with 99% of their populations using the internet. The People's Republic of China has the most internet uses in the world with more than a billion people online and is expected to have one third of the global Internet of Things (IoT) market share by 2025. However, the last time that it was reported in 2018, China's digital Gini coefficient was 0.59, indicating a high level of digital inequality. There is a big urban rural divide in terms of internet access in China, as the internet penetration is much higher in urban areas than in rural areas. In 2018, the internet penetration rate was 74.6% in urban areas and only 38.5% in rural areas. Additionally, China faces the problem of the digital divide due to imbalances in the diffusion of information and communication technologies, high online charges, insufficiently trained staff, imperfect network legations and information resources shortages in Chinese language. The age-based divide is also severe in terms of internet access in China. As of March 2020, China's elderly internet users, over the age of 60 accounted for only 6.7% of the total number of internet users and the penetration rate of elderly internet users was 23.7%, less than one third of the young Internet users, which stood at 73%. The estimates were according to the total population and composition of China at the end of the year, 2019.

The countries that perform the best in terms of reducing the digital divide include Iceland, South Korea, the United Kingdom (UK) and Singapore, and can be useful lessons for the others aiming at reducing the divide and leveraging the full potentials of the Internet Age. Iceland has widespread internet access, lack of restrictions on online content, and has widespread investment in infrastructure. Iceland is considered to have no digital divides across geography, gender or education levels. South Korea has invested in infrastructure and education, with a focus on science and technology studies, while the UK has used policies and programmes to build digital skills in the population. Singapore is considered to have one of the world's best ranges of online services and e-participation tools. While every country in its own is struggling to deal with the digital divide, comparative studies with countries that are at similar demographic and income levels would go a long way in identifying mechanisms that may work and may not work in combating the digital divide.

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