

UNDERSTANDING THE NECESSITY TO BRIDGE THE DIGITAL DIVIDE: AN EVALUATIVE STUDY

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Abstract The term 'Digital Divide' refers to the difference in the amount of information among individuals who have an access to the Internet and those who lack such access. This gap includes imbalances in terms of access to Internet infrastructure, information and knowledge, and equality of opportunity depending on income, race, ethnicity, gender, or other similar criteria. This paper explores the meaning of digital divide and connects it to Indian scenario. It talks about the causes of digital divide in the society like gender, physical access, age, income, and lack of information and communication technology (ICT) skills. It also analyses the causes and remedies of Digital Divide and further discusses the role of digital libraries in eradicating the digital divide. Finally, the paper suggests some steps that need to be taken by government in order to bridge the digital divide in the country.

Keywords: Digital Divide, Digital Libraries, Gender Divide, ICTs, Role of Government

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development and diffusion of the information and communication technologies (ICTs) have fundamentally changed many aspects of life and societies around the world. ICTs have become an integral part of today's world. With the development of ICT, there has been a change in the way people work and interact in the society. Enhanced access to knowledge is rapidly becoming a potent tool for empowering the people and communities in their quest for new opportunities, dignity, and a better life (Singh, 2010). The capacity to produce and make use of information plays an important role in socioeconomic make-up of our lives. In order to improve the standard of living, universal access to ICT is required. It will bring a globally common community in terms of education, business, research, etc. Therefore, if 'digital divide' exists in the society, it will negatively affect such outcomes and act as an obstacle in the development of societies and the nation as a whole. Thus, a proper understanding of this issue is required and factors influencing the digital divide are to be taken care of. There is a need to bridge this gap for effective digital communication throughout the world without any loopholes.

OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

These are as follows:

- To understand the concept of digital divide;
- To identify the causes that lead to digital divide in the society;

- To discuss the role of digital libraries in bridging the digital divide; and
- To provide valuable suggestions with regard to the role of government in bridging digital divide.

WHAT IS A DIGITAL DIVIDE?

Advancements in the technology, telecommunication, and mechanisation have largely contributed to the world in terms of economic development. However, there has been an unequal benefit of ICT to the people all over the world living in different countries and regions (Kukshal & Pant, 2013). This leads to the divide between people on the use of such technologies referred to as 'Digital Divide'. The term 'digital divide' refers to 'the gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels with regard both to their opportunities to access information and communication technologies (ICTs) and to their use of the Internet for a wide variety of activities' (OECD, 2001). It is simply the difference (gap) between those individuals who have a regular access to the digital sources of information (Internet) and those without such access. It includes the substantial access to the information technology and the skills/resources that are required to enjoy such access. However, it is not only the issue of unavailability of information, but can also be attributed to the political, institutional, cultural, and social reluctance that contribute towards the lack of access or the incapability to make use of

them efficiently (Warschauer, 2003). Digital divide can be of many types recognised all over the world such as the gender divide, the income divide, or the age divide, etc. Each one of them has its particular background and specific perspective (Boje & Dragulanescu, 2003).

DIGITAL DIVIDE AND GENDER DIVIDE

Digital divide exists in variety of levels. It may exist at sector, community, and individual level. The differences in access and use of ICT between men and women lead to digital gender divide (DGD). It is believed that a DGD is the outcome of the existing gender-related inequalities. It is also argued that women are 'technophobic' and, therefore, men tend to be better users of digital tools, whereas others claim that the women passionately embrace digital communication (Hilbert, 2011). According to a survey conducted in the United States, it was concluded that the men are fond of internet for the 'experiences it offers', whereas women prefer it for the 'human connections it promotes' (Fallows, 2005). ICT has the potential to bring about changes and develop a nation. Specifically, looking at India, ICT can be a powerful tool for women empowerment. A better understanding of all the aspects of DGD is necessary in order to prevent the adverse effect of unequal access on women as well as to enhance the potential of ICT to become an effective tool for women empowerment.

CAUSES OF DIGITAL DIVIDE

These are as follows:

- *Income Inequality*: Income plays an important role in accessing digital resources. The lower income developing countries have less access to the Internet. (Chakraborty & Bosman, 2005) found that there is a clear evidence of income-related distributional inequalities regarding home PC ownership across the nation.
- *Education*: Poor education is also one of the causes of digital divide in the society. It is, therefore, necessary that the information technology should be included in the curriculum right from the very basic level of education so as to remove the digital divide. The Indian government has recently identified the need for the same. The government has introduced IT in the syllabus right from the primary level so as to develop the skills among the students and make them to know about various techniques of searching the web (Behera, 2011).
- *Literacy Rate*: Literacy rate of India according to 2011 census is 74.04 per cent. While analysing the statistics, we find that men literacy rate is 82.14 per cent whereas

as women literacy rate is only 65.46 per cent. We can thus consider it one of the factors for less use of ICTs by women than men.

- *Computer Literacy*: It is very important to have a technical know-how in terms of using web services. People who can make use of computers have more chance of getting high-profile jobs than those who cannot operate computers in spite of being literate and competent.
- *Lack of Access*: Lack of access to digital sources can be an important factor that leads to digital divide. Less developed countries do not have that easy access to digital sources as compared to highly developed countries. Apart from having or not having access to digital sources, quality of digital networks is also an issue.
- *Attitudinal Factors*: Attitudinal factors can be culture-based or behaviour-based. Such factors can also lead to DGD.
- *Language*: Language is also one of the most important barriers of digital communication. Not all people across the world are well acquainted with English language, particularly the poor. This may also be one of the consequences of lack of education. As a result, such people remain less connected to digital sources leading to digital divide.
- *Age*: People of different age groups have varying interests. They may have different informational needs. The information needs of young people may be quite different from those who are old. Also, such people may not be too interested in digital content available to them making less frequent use of digital sources; thus, creating a digital divide in the society.

ROLE OF DIGITAL LIBRARIES

Digital libraries make use of ICT and the web to provide access to the local and remote digital information sources and services. Therefore, accessibility to the basic ICT and the Internet is a prerequisite to the development and use of digital libraries (Gobinda, n.d.) Libraries are considered as one of the important tools which can help resolve the issue of information divide entrenched in the digital divide and pave a way towards the realisation of democratic society. As libraries are wired for the Internet, working people who do not have a computer at home or at work can use their neighbourhood library to go online, set up a free e-mail account, and gain access to websites that meet their needs (Bansode & Patil, 2011). Libraries must be redesigned in providing services to their customers. In order to provide effective and attractive library services, it is important that various IT tools and services should be reviewed and

upgraded. It is also important for the policy-makers to recognise the fundamental role that the librarians can play in the creation of knowledge-based society and sustainable development (Aqili & Moghaddam, 2008). Libraries must gear up to play an important role in imparting information

literacy to empower information user communities. It is also important that the libraries should continuously familiarise their users with new techniques of having access to ICTs, which can eventually help in bridging the digital gap (Panda, Chhatar, & Bulu, 2013).

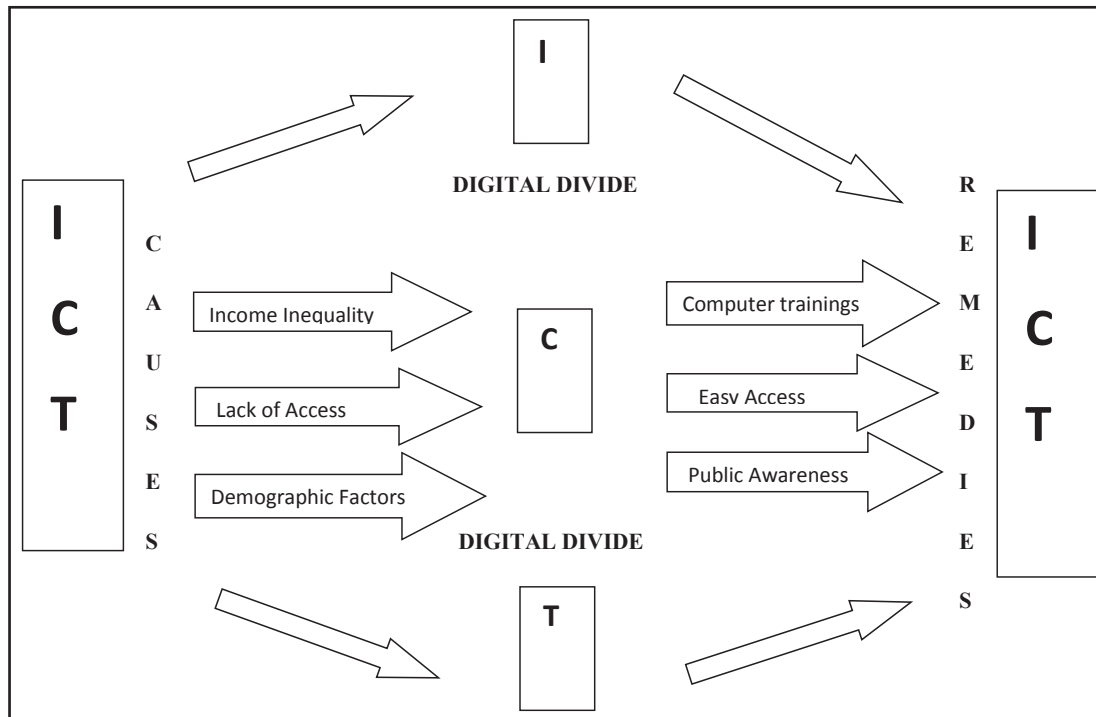


Fig. 1: Causes and Remedies for Digital Divide: Conceptual Model

ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

India is in complex socioeconomic condition. There are variety of cultures, languages, and religions in the country. There is an unequal development in the society due to improper implementation of various policies and programmes. There is also an unequal access to resources in the society. Such issues need to be addressed at macro level. Thus, the government has an important role to play in such a scenario. It has been predicted by experts at national level that the lack of digital literacy will have an adverse impact on economic prospects. ICTs are one way or the other transforming societies, improving our digital literacy and understanding, eliminating power discrepancies, creating a free and democratic world society, and providing several other benefits (The Digital Divide, ICT and Broadband Internet, 2015). In order to improve the digital access and remove the prevailing digital divide in the country, the government might offer some form of support. Various steps need to be taken, such as:

- Public libraries should be set up for people who are not able to get access in educational institutions like schools, colleges, universities, etc.

- Awareness should be created among people about the uses of digital sources and the need to make use of such resources for various purposes. Such awareness should be brought through public campaigns and printed sources.
- For people who are not well acquainted with computer skills, public computer training centres must be set up. Providing training to people can improve their ability and willingness to use digital sources of information.
- Rural digital access should be improved.
- More projects like Gyandoot, Bhoomi, Toarahat, etc., should be taken up for better rural information network access.
- The government should also work on lowering the internet access prices so that poor people can also make use of digital resources so as to bridge the ICT divide. E-governance could become a powerful instrument in bridging the gap, such as ensuring affordable broadband access.

CONCLUSIONS

The dramatic development of ICT is improving the way people live, work, learn, and interact. Access to digital

sources has become very important in the present era. It has revolutionised the system of information access. However, unequal access to digital sources has created an issue of digital divide across various countries. Digital divide exists in variety of levels. The differences in access and use of ICT between men and women lead to DGD. The government has an important role to play in bridging this gap and promoting digital literacy. Awareness among masses and proper training is required. Providing 'Ease of Access' is one of the important steps that should be taken to avoid the digital inequality. Therefore, digital divide is an issue that needs to be tackled at macro level in order to gain a sustainable society. In a nutshell, bridging the digital divide should become a world priority.

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