

The Digital Divide

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While technology is increasingly integrated into daily life, there are still many who lack access to the Internet or digital technology. While technology is bringing social and economic benefits to many, there are others being left behind. The Digital Divide refers to the gap between those who benefit from the Digital Age and those who don't. It was initially attributed to underdevelopment and was perceived as something temporary that would resolve itself with the increasing popularity of technology. However, even today, this gap still remains.

There are three types of divides: Access, Use and Quality of Use. The Access Divide refers to the ability of people to access this resource. Socio-economic differences are mostly the cause here, for individual people and countries themselves. Technology and its implementation can be costly investments, especially if the infrastructure isn't already there. The Use Divide refers to the digital skills people have. These would be the basic skills needed to properly use technology, such as attaching files to emails, creating a word document, etc. The Quality of Use Divide refers to people knowing how to use their digital skills. For example, being able to use Google search but not properly determining good sources of information.

There are many factors that contribute to the Digital Divide:

- Education: Households with higher levels of education are shown to use the internet and technology more. Households with post-secondary levels of education are ten times more likely to have internet access at home and work.
- Income: This is also tied to Education. Households with higher levels of education traditionally have higher income levels. Those with incomes over \$75,000 are 20 times more likely to have home internet access and 10 times more likely to have a computer if living in a city or suburban area. Neighborhoods with low socioeconomic levels tend to lack the infrastructure present in more affluent areas. This is because outside telecommunication companies find it less appealing to invest in these areas, which further aggravates the divide.
- Race: The race wealth gap is directly tied to the digital divide. The gaps between racial groups narrow at higher income levels, but as expected, widens among households at lower economic levels. Minority households are two times less likely to own a computer/have internet access than White households. In a cultural study to

determine reasons for the divide other than income, the Hispanic, African-American, and Asian-American communities were studied. In the Hispanic community, it was observed that computers were a luxury, not a need; computer activities isolated individuals and took away valuable time from family activities. In the African-American community, it was observed that African-Americans, historically, have had negative encounters with technological innovations. Asian-Americans, on the other hand, generally emphasize education, resulting in a larger number embracing rising technological advances. (Stanford)

When it comes to the Digital Divide, this is an ethical problem that we face as a society. Technological discrimination is a form of poverty and social exclusion, depriving some citizens of essential resources for development and wealth generation. This was even more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, as many people could not successfully work and learn online. For those without access to technology or the skills to use it, there is a lack of communication and isolation that happens. There is also a perpetuation of social differences, as those without access fall further behind economically, educationally and so on.

The digital divide, as a whole, remains an enormous and complicated issue. However, there is an effort happening to work toward solutions to narrow the gap. These include:

- Universal Access/Community Access Centers: Creating spaces where people can go to access the internet and learn technology-based skills is one of the major solutions being implemented.
- Digital Literacy Programs: Investing in digital literacy, beginning at a young age and continuing through adulthood, can make people better consumers of digital ecosystems.
- Affordability Programs: Expanding programs that make broadband and telephone access more affordable for households. Typically, these programs are geared toward schools and libraries. Opening them up to households with school age children, especially those that are in “desert” areas.

- Continued change of attitude around technology: Aside from the physical solutions listed, this is one of the most important. The mindset around technology is that it is a convenience and not a need. However, in today's society, everything is linked to some form of technology. Without access to technology, you lose access to a lot of society. And you are discluded. We, as a society, need to start seeing technology as integral to all that we do. Once it's seen as a right, instead of a privilege, the way we approach the issue of the digital divide will change.

The digital divide is a societal issue that needs to be solved. While there are efforts to close this gap, there needs to be more attention brought to it. It's easy in a city like New York to forget that not everyone has the same access to technology. This was evident (and still is) as NYC public schools navigate the Covid-19 pandemic. As society continues to move toward becoming a more technological society, we cannot let our fellow citizens get left behind.

Sources:

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- 5) [Lower-income Americans still less likely to have home broadband, smartphone | Pew Research Center](#)
- 6) <https://hbr.org/2021/07/how-to-close-the-digital-divide-in-the-u-s>