

The digital divide - where are we now?

By [Keith Matthews](#)

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From a purely observational standpoint, it might seem like humanity has now bridged the digital divide. Wherever you go in today's world you are sure to see someone scrolling through pages on their smartphone or doing something in daily life that requires an internet connection. We've come to take that connection for granted.



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That's what the digital divide used to refer to, the gulf between those people who were online versus those who were not. So, with over four billion people on the planet connected to the internet and billions of connected devices, is the digital divide really being conquered?

More technologies, divides remain

Technology has advanced incredibly rapidly in the two decades since the term digital divide was coined. Mobile and cellular devices are now commonplace, mobile broadband changed the way we work and play forever, but we have not yet overcome the notion of a digital divide.

There are still geographical differences because access to technology is better in more developed economies, while there are also sociological differences in internet use.

For example, only 25% of South Africans in the Eastern Cape's rural communities use the internet, compared with over 75% in Gauteng and Cape Town. Similarly, Mpumalanga, North West and the Northern Cape are slightly behind with

internet penetration figures in those provinces at 26.5%, 32.1% and 32.9% respectively, according to a research report by World Wide Worx and Dark Fibre Africa, titled "Internet Access in South Africa", 2017.



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The World Economic Forum has observed that polarization of societies and growth in income divides can be attributed to the growth of technology and a digital divide. In more developed regions, blue collar jobs are being replaced by technology, creating a digital gap that did not exist before. Technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) could cause divides to deepen further still, fuelling the innovation/job creation versus replacing human workers argument that has always been at the centre of AI.

According to an AI report by Accenture, published in 2017, AI will create a market worth over \$35bn by 2025 and double annual economic growth rates. However, in South Africa, this algorithmic power is dividing the economy, as most organisations find themselves encumbered by legacy technologies, systems, models, and traditional corporate structures.

New technologies, new digital divides?

Ever-increasing penetration of devices and continuing emergence of new digital technologies could lead to new digital divides. This can also be seen between the different social classes in each country. Among adult South Africans earning more than R30,000/month, internet penetration is at 82.4%.

Penetration declines rapidly as income declines, falling to 61.3% for those earning between R14,000 and R18,000/month, 42% for those earning between R3,000 and R6,000/month, and below 30% for those earning below R2,500/month – according to the aforementioned World Wide Worx and Dark Fibre Africa study.



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Therefore, it is crucial that the country prioritises the roll-out of technological infrastructure in underserved areas, targeting all income groups for the affordability of all.

According to a study by Common Sense Media, in the United States, computer and device proliferation have evolved, with nearly 75% of US families with lower salaries today having access to high-speed connectivity, up from 46% in 2013.

The way media is used

What has changed now is the way media is used, with lower-income parents putting their children in front of screens for nearly twice as long each day as richer parents. The report suggested that lower-income families use mobile devices effectively as babysitters.

According to Kevin Clark at the Centre for Digital Media, Innovation and Diversity at George Mason University, this trend has created something new: "It's not a technology divide, it's a content divide. And it's a divide in how the technology is being used." The impact of this content divide is yet to be fully seen.

A security divide?

Another new digital divide is in security. The Internet Society Global Internet Report 2017 suggests that cyber threats are creating security “haves” and “have-nots”: fundamentally, technology users who have skills and resources to sufficiently protect their digital lives, versus those who do not. This makes the latter much more likely to be a victim of cybercrime.

Technology users in developed nations with higher disposable incomes can afford more security applications and solutions, such as a small monthly payment for a VPN to secure activity when using public Wi-Fi. However, that small monthly payment becomes relatively much more to someone in a less developed country.

Internet access – a human right?

The continuing existence of a digital divide fuels the UN’s attempts to classify internet access as a fundamental human right. A 2016 resolution by the UN Human Rights Council stated its condemnation for countries that take away or disrupt citizens’ internet access.

The view of the UN was that internet access gives citizens “vast opportunities for affordable and inclusive education globally,” and in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, technology offers the “great potential to accelerate human progress.”

According to the World Economic Forum (2014), each additional 10% of internet penetration can lead to a 1.2% increase in per capita GDP growth in emerging economies. This potential growth emphasises on the internet access being a crucial human right for all.

Despite these setbacks, there are positive signs that the digital divide will continue to close given the continuing proliferation of technology and connectivity and the younger generation’s familiarity with technology.

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