Introduction

When facing global digital inequality, the main issue stems from the history of the digital divide. The digital divide is about the gap between the wired rich and the unconnected poor. Countries from Africa and the Asia-Pacific region suffer the most from this divide, despite having the majority of the world’s population. Globally, around 429 million people are online, which is only 6% of the entire world’s population. The divide also exists among countries of the same region. In the Asia Pacific region, for example, connectivity ratings include Singapore at the highest and Sri Lanka at the lowest. Asia sharply reflects this divide because it has countries at every point along the development spectrum.

Moreover, there are other factors that contribute to digital inequality. For example, in terms of gender, women are only 22% of Asia’s 48 million Internet users, even if they constitute half of the region’s population. A closer look at the ongoing issue indicates that the digital divide is only partly about access. The divide actually reflects issues that have segregated societies all over the world: gender, urban/rural and income. Hence, measures to reduce global digital inequality between Less Economically Developed Countries (LEDCs) and More Economically Developed Countries (MEDCs) have to be tackled from each of these spectrums.
Background

A digital divide has gradually been formed due to the large advancements in technology over the past decades between LEDCs and MEDCs. This had thus lead to global digital inequality throughout the world. Developing counties are finding it difficult to keep up with the rapid growth of the internet and technology, hence putting many of its citizens in deep disadvantage compared with those in developed countries. Differences in technology such as the lack of high-quality computers, fast internet, technical assistance or telephone services can all have an influence in developing countries, quickly leading to a digital gap. In fact, many terms have been used to describe such situations, including “digital awareness” or “digital literacy” whereby this is measured depending on how many different ways people are able to use these new, broadband connected tools.

This issue has branched out into many similar problems as a result of this gap, including disadvantages in terms of education and work for the people in developing countries. The concept of the digital divide was originally popularized in regard to the disparity in Internet access between rural and urban areas of the US, but is now used today to describe how the Internet has developed unevenly throughout countries, causing most developing countries to fall behind in tourism, democracy, labor and education. The global digital divide also contributes greatly to the inequality of access to goods and services available through technology. People in developing countries with limited access to computers and the internet that may improve education are hence disadvantaged.

Problems Raised

In many developing countries, global digital inequality has affected education and young children’s ability to learn and develop skills in their low-income schools. For example, many schools have yet to establish internet access in LEDCs and, thus, children attending these schools are rendered unable to cultivate necessary technology-related skills in order to understand today’s dynamic economy. Nowadays, children rely greatly on technology to help with their
education. To prove this, the Federal Communication Commission’s Broadband Task Force published a report showing that 70% of teachers hand students homework requiring access to the Internet and 65% of children use the Internet when coming back from school to complete assignments or homework in order to access any school-related discussion boards and shared files. In an experiment, it was shown that 50% of students were unable to complete their assignments because of an inability to locate a technological source. This resulted in 42% of students achieving a lower grade due to this lack of technological access.

Furthermore, social capital is also a victim of this issue. Technology advances in education can help to improve a person’s future social and cultural capital, which is acquired through repeated interactions with other individuals or groups. When citizens lack access to the internet due to the fact that they live in developing countries and have backgrounds of limited access in terms of education, this can highly impact their social capital causing it to decrease rapidly compared to a citizen in more developed countries with regular access to the internet.

**Social Mobility**

Global digital inequality has also affected social mobility. Given access to modern technology, workers on digital platforms will be much better in figuring out their potential employment options. This is because such platforms will be able to assist workers in determining their skills and setting out pathways for these citizens to realize which jobs are best for them. Such technology is crucial in helping people find new opportunities as more and more workers are displaced through efficiency and automation. However, many developing countries find it difficult to operate such technologies and many workers are highly unaware of these advances. Hence, large disadvantages occur in result of this absentmindedness and people in developing countries are now getting left behind by the rapid pace of technological change in terms of learning how to make the most of search engines, social media, mobile phones and platforms of labor and talent.
International Actions

The ASEAN Initiative

Government and business leaders of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation identified a few requirements or regions to overcome the global digital inequality issue. In response to this discovery, they formed the e-ASEAN Task Force, which has been mandated to develop a broad and comprehensive action plan that will develop the competencies within ASEAN to compete in the global economy. ICT education is a crucial component of its undertakings as well. For example, they created a common IT market, promoted e-commerce and supported e-governance.

The SEAMEO Response

The Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) formulated the SEAMEO IT Plan in moving towards its implementation. They have made many large efforts in establishing ICT education, specifically for the training of teachers and principals. They have also developed a Personnel Management Information System that serves as a tracking system for learners and database of courses and resources in order to make sure all schools and learners in developing countries can keep up with the same amount of ICT education people in developed countries are able to enjoy.

Free Basics

A collaboration between various social networking services have created Free Basics, an initiative that has one common goal: to bring more affordable and accessible Internet services to LEDCs. In this sense, it aims to increase efficiency and enable the development of new business models around the provision of Internet access. It aids less fortunate citizens to be able to access services on their mobile phones for free and without data charges, including content about potential opportunities in terms of employment, health and education etc. Nevertheless, there are a few drawbacks to this program. For example, it was accused of violating net neutrality for limiting access to handpicked services. India, especially has resisted quite heavily towards this program where the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India was eventually banned. It especially
Tech4Ed Program in the Philippines concentrates on school children and their parents, helping to make them both equally knowledgeable about computers, using application programs and by navigating the Internet.

Key Players

*Massachusetts Institution of Technology (MIT)*

An organization was created called the IMARA organization by a group of volunteers hoping to narrow the digital gap through CommuniTech (a program that began in 2000 where old computers were donated to economically disadvantaged people nearby). Today, this organization has decided to expand this project internationally and help teach the recipients on how to use the technology usefully and efficiently as well. Its main goal is to develop long-term, sustainable resolutions that will improve the accessibility of technology and research resources for LEDCs in terms of education. Their focuses in this project vary from empowering communities, training local experts, establishing community learning and technology centers to developing partnerships with industry in order to make a difference in the world.

*Philippines*

As a developing country, the Philippines has contributed a grand amount in hoping to reduce its own disadvantages in terms of the digital divide. It has launched a recent organization that has been very beneficial for both children and adults living in developing countries in terms of education, especially in the Philippines. This project’s main goal is to set up community centers across the country where out-of-school youth, senior citizens, housewives and other underserved sectors of society have frequent accessibility to online government services and learning modules for skills development, digital literacy and other forms of education. They do this for reasons of aiding students and fresh graduates who don’t have the same equal amount of resources as other young adults in developed countries to be more digital literate and for housewives and mothers to learn ways in which they can manage a small business online.

*The United Nations*
This organization has contributed greatly by raising awareness about the issue of the digital divide. They have specifically accomplished this by way of the World Information Society Day as well as creating the Information and Communications Technology Task Force. It represented an example of a volunteering initiative contributing greatly to the online issue at hand, implying an increase in person-hours dedicated to development cooperation at essentially no additional cost.

One Laptop Per Child

This program helps children living in poor and isolated regions within developing countries to have access to laptops which are specifically designed to withstand more abuse than higher-end machines, whilst also containing features in context to the unique conditions that remote villages present. Each laptop belongs to an individual child and provides a gateway to digital learning and internet access. They are also all capable of automatically networking with other laptops given to similar children in order to access the Internet through a single point of access.

Possible Solutions

Developing Local Content

This means that because it isn’t necessarily sufficient to provide technical tools for Internet access to everyone living in developing countries, it may be more efficient to have helpful networks built for local content. For example, many governments have begun to offer online services for employment, taxes, or licenses in hopes to generate local content. Developers are also seeing success with local sites and apps that help people share with each other in a particular region. All this new content can also be designed to work on devices that are available and popular in that area, rather than the latest smartphones used in Europe or the United States. For example, one of the main obstacles to internet use in Africa is the challenge of simply charging devices in many parts of the continent. To solve such issues, solutions such as hosting simple programs devoted wholly to developing apps that consume as little power as possible could be used to reduce any future problems.
Increasing ICT Education

ICT education can be given to narrow the digital divide. As stated above, issues related to the digital divide include segregation in societies. ICT education could thus contribute significantly to addressing the issues by developing cyber fluency that enables learners to utilize tools and interpret content. NGOs and other charities can help fund for these schools to provide such education so that children and the learners will be able to access content, analyze its value and apply it to their needs. At the community level, this means having community technology centers that make technology relevant to local needs. For example, neighborhood technology skills training could be offered. Additionally, community spaces on the Internet could be created so that the local people can communicate and interact regarding matters that are important to them. ICT education could be made as relevant as possible to the needs of the teachers and students. This could be in terms of enabling them to explore, create and share content that improves the quality of their lives. Again, funding developing countries’ schools by NGOs and other organizations for such matters is a key essential for these privileges.

Glossary

Digital Inequality

The disparities in knowledge and ability of using digital and information technology among individuals with different demographics, socioeconomic backgrounds, and digital and information technology experience and competencies.

Digital Divide

An economic and social inequality with regard to access to, use of, or impact of information and communication technologies. The divide within countries may refer to inequalities between individuals, households, businesses, or geographic areas, usually at different socioeconomic levels or other demographic categories.

Social Capital

The networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling that society to function effectively.

Social Mobility
The movement of individuals, families, households, or other categories of people within or between layers or tiers in an open system of social stratification. Essentially, it is a person’s ability to move to a different social class, usually from a lower to a higher social class.
Sources


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