

## Part II: Internet Governance Issues – Access

The World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) added a whole new dimension to the issues of Internet Governance in its Tunis Agenda. Development came into focus as a key agenda. The Internet governance discussions expanded from DNS (Domain Name System) Wars and root servers and critical infrastructure to a wider realm encompassing issues like access, content, multilingualism, security etc.

In this issue, we will discuss the issue of access or the lack of it, i.e. the phenomenon called ‘digital divide’.

Digital divide cannot be seen as an independent phenomenon separate from the broad socio-economic inequalities such as access to drinking water, electricity, education, health care etc. These inequalities exist between the global North and South as well as within each nation.

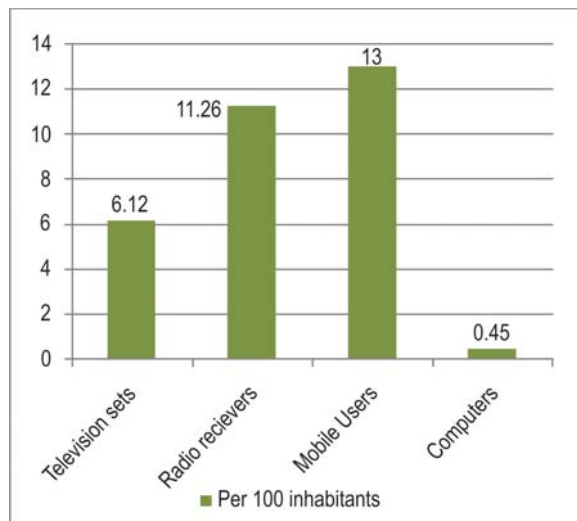
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines digital divide as the gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels in terms of both their opportunities to access Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and to their use the Internet for a wide variety of activities. The differences in access to information and ability to use the information are due to geography, race, gender, economic status and physical ability. We will explore some of the disparities in access within India.

In most nations, as with India, economic status often dictates the access to technology and therefore is a major factor perpetrating the divide in the digital era. More than 700 million Indians live in rural areas, much of which is untouched by modern communications. Around 30% of rural homes do not even have electricity.

In 2005, The International Telecommunications Union (ITU) estimated that there were around 60 million Internet users in India, about 5% of the population. Only a fraction of these have Internet access in their home.

The percentage of Internet users in India is slightly higher than the percentage PC availability in the country. This can be vastly attributed to public access points such as Internet cafes, various kiosks and telecentres operated by the private and public sector.

Compared to other modes of information dissemination, the availability of PCs is still scanty in India. Radio being the oldest mode of information dissemination amongst the four has a much higher penetration than television or computers. However, the mobile telecommunication



Distribution of access to modes of information dissemination in India

industry has shown explosive growth in recent years in India and has overtaken all other modes of communication and information dissemination.

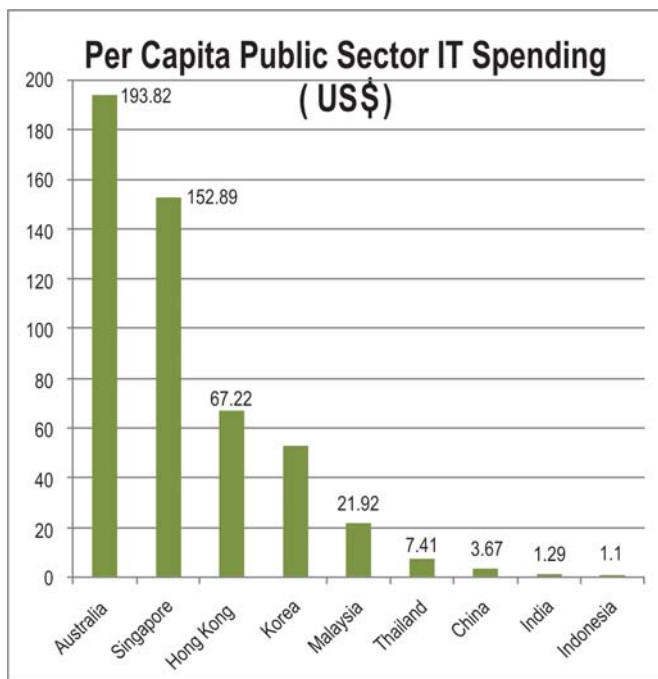
Within Asia, India has the third highest number of users in absolute figures, surpassed only by China and Japan. The Indian Subcontinent (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan) comprises of about 16% of the Internet users in all of Asia. India herself makes up 13% of that. Even though that figure gives an impression of high penetration it is not a true reflection of reality. The actual penetration (% population) is only 5.3% in India, 0.3% in Bangladesh and 2.0% in Sri Lanka.

The low Internet penetration in these countries can be broadly attributed to the following factors – high deployment cost, lack of infrastructure, regulatory issues, limited and expensive international bandwidth, and lack of relevant and localised content.

### The case of India

The per capita public sector IT spending is an indication of the focus of the country on enhancement of IT services in the country.

Data in the chart indicates that India has one of lowest per capita IT spending when compared with some of the Asian countries. Even with such low comparative figures, the efforts to span the digital divide is gaining momentum. This is largely due to the combination of contributions of the public, private and civil society sectors.



### Per Capita IT Spending in US Dollars

The government of India has declared IT as one of the thrust areas for the country's development and has recognised it as an essential service. States like Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, West Bengal and now Tamil Nadu have been playing a significant role in introducing IT for industrial and economic development. These states have active action plans emphasising the growth of IT industries that will extend the benefits of IT application to all types of industries, enterprises, and private and public organisations and institutions. Several state governments have started investing in an IT infrastructure for e-Governance projects. e-Governance in India is growing at a rapid pace with a further investment of INR 400 billion (USD 9.4 billion) this year.

Some success stories include Project Akshaya, an IT dissemination project launched in 2002 in Malappuram, a district in Kerala. The project's objective was to develop 5000 networked Multi-purpose Community Technology Centers – Akshaya eKendras – to provide ICT access to entire population of the state. In Malappuram alone, the project has trained more than 5.9 lakh people. 65% of their trainees are women. The success of this project at district level has led to a state wide roll out of the project at all levels.

Another successful example of positive efforts by the public sector to bridge the gap between agricultural production and

agro-retail market felt by farmers is eChoupal. eChoupals are information centres connected to the Internet and represent an approach to seamlessly connect subsistence farmers with global markets. eChoupal has helped link the largest labour force with the mandis, the international markets as well as the final consumer at much reduced transaction costs.

Digital divide also affects those with physical or mental disabilities. Turning Point, a small organisation in the city of Calcutta tries to bridge the gap by introducing ICTs to victims of mental health illnesses. The founders of Turning Point, Calcutta, found that computers and the Internet provided better forms of access and connectivity which was not available in 'real' life for these people. The computer being a machine, most victims felt safe experimenting, providing them ample opportunity to remain connected with the outside world and share their experiences with other member of Self Help Groups (SHGs) from across the world.

Big businesses are also throwing their considerable muscle behind initiatives to connect India. Microsoft, for example, revealed plans to set up a network of 50,000 internet kiosks across India over the next three years. The Saksham project, a Microsoft endeavour to set up PC kiosks in at least 200,000 villages by 2010, aims to use existing phone lines or VSAT satellite link-ups that are run by local entrepreneurs.

n-logue is another organization which has run pilot kiosk projects for over five years. n-Logue was launched to fulfil the need for Internet and voice services in every underserved small town and village in India. Marketed under the brand name 'Chiraag', which means enlightenment, n-Logue has developed several services that provide benefits to rural areas while also contributing to the kiosks sustainability.

These varied efforts all amalgamate in helping to bridge the digital divide. However, concerted efforts are required as they are more efficacious with minimum wastage or duplication of projects and resources. The development agenda of the Internet Governance Forum being held in the city of Hyderabad from the 3rd to the 6th of December will bring the issue of digital divide to the forefront for all concerned stakeholders. Utilisation of public sector funds, penetration of private sector efforts in bridging digital divide and up-scaling of smaller successful initiatives by the civil society organisations will be some of the key discussion topics at the upcoming event.

### References and resources

- Digital Divide Network, <http://www.digitaldividenetwork.org/>
- Asia Internet Usage and Population statistics, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm>



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