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Digital Divide in Pakistan: Threats and Future Outlook

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Key Points:

- The term “digital divide” was first coined by Larry Irving in the 1990s. It initially, focused on the access or non-access question, but with mobile phones’ penetration in our lives, reaching more than 90%, the question has moved toward the quality of bandwidth and skills.
- It is important to understand the existing class differences, in order to understand the digital divide in Pakistan,
- Internet accessibility does not follow a homogenous pattern all across Pakistan, and there remains a wide gap in the use of digital devices and related infrastructure based on geography (rural and urban). This, in turn, leads to marginalisation of certain communities of the society which reduces economic growth.
- The less the digital divide, the more opportunities can be provided for the marginalised communities and geographical locations, towards digitalisation of Pakistan.
- The threat that the digital divide pose, resides in the non-traditional domain, and it is the least catered for as far as the hybridity of threats is concerned.

Introduction

In the world of 21st-century interconnectedness, it is fairly easy for humans to interact with institutions in a society and live in a harmonious manner. Since the advent of the internet and the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), the world indeed has moved along the parameters put forth by globalisation.¹ With the omnipresence of devices and technologies surrounding us, it would seem naive to think that certain sectors or groups of the society could do without such connectivity. After all, the 21st century is the century of information and communication technologies (ICTs), Artificial

Intelligence (AI) and Social Media platforms. But to our surprise, this has not been the case in general and specifically for Pakistan. The lack of availability of ICTs refers to the concept of the digital divide.

Understanding the Digital Divide

This is defined as an uneven distribution of ICTs across different groups. This uneven distribution stems from the fact that ICTs are usually costly. Simply put, it is a digital split that spurs a social issue within a society or a state, among those who have access to the internet and those who do not.² The term “digital divide” was first coined by Larry Irving in the 1990s while he was serving at National Telecommunication and Information Administration in the United States

¹ Esref Erturk, “A Comprehensive Approach to the Role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in globalization,” *The Journal of International Social Research* 8, no. 38 (2015): 359.

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² “The Digital Divide, ICT, and Broadband Internet,” *Internet World Stats*, accessed June 10, 2020, <https://www.internetworldstats.com/links10.htm>.

(US).³ Initially, the idea focused on the access or non-access question, but with mobile phones' penetration in our lives reaching more than 90%, the question has moved toward the quality of bandwidth and skills.⁴ The digital divide revolves around the following contours of the use of ICTs and its characteristics that define the divide along the lines of income, education, location, and gender.

The Class Divide in Pakistan – Basis for Digital Divide

The digital divide in Pakistan is no different than the rest of the world. Every state, including Pakistan has its own problems concerning the digital divide. In order to understand the digital divide in Pakistan, it is important to understand the existing class differences. Among many other problems that are being faced by different population segments of Pakistan, division on the basis of class is the most imminent one. There is a general understanding that people in the lower socio-economic strata are more inclined towards perpetrating violence in society – including intolerance and hate crimes. They are considered irrational beings.⁵ This is in contrast with urban elites who are educated and are considered as rational beings. This thinking somehow takes its roots from the colonial legacy of the subcontinent. According to the Inclusive Internet Index 2020, Pakistan is ranked 76th out of 100 countries in terms of availability, affordability, relevance, and readiness.⁶

Digital Divide and Service Providers

Internet accessibility is also affected by non-neutrality coming from internet service providers. These providers also discriminate on the basis of geographic location. Based on these locations, the availability, services, prices, content, and platforms vary across different groups.⁷ This again falls under the debate of rural versus urban. The government of Pakistan has the Universal Services Fund to support and make available these internet services in under-served areas,

³ "Larry Irving", *Internet Hall of Fame*, accessed June 10, 2020, <https://www.internethalloffame.org/inductees/larry-irving>.

⁴ *Global Mobile Consumer Trends*. London: Deloitte, 2017, accessed June 10, 2020. <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/us/Documents/technology-media-telecommunications/us-global-mobile-consumer-survey-second-edition.pdf>.

⁵ Abraham Shah, "Class divide - Pakistan's main problem," *Daily Times*, last modified May 6, 2017, <https://dailytimes.com.pk/12847/class-divide-pakistans-main-problem/>.

⁶ "The Inclusive Internet Index 2020," *The Inclusive Internet*, accessed June 11, 2020, <https://theinclusiveinternet.eiu.com/explore/countries/PK/?category=overall>.

⁷ Saleha Zahid, "A widening digital divide," *Dawn News*, last modified June 2, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1411527>.

but it has also remained under-utilised.⁸

Digital Divide and Geography

The internet accessibility does not follow a homogenous pattern all across Pakistan, and there remains a wide gap of the use of digital devices and related infrastructure based on geography (rural and urban). This, in turn, leads to marginalisation of certain communities of the society, which reduces economic growth. The areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, as well as erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), have experienced the digital divide. The state machinery also uses this as a political tool, justified by the idea of national security. Likewise, in Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir, the Special Communications Organization (SCO) maintains a monopoly over the provisions of the internet. However, another angle to this story - the harsh terrain, terrorism and fewer profit prospects to afford such services - also presents a stark reality where the ineffectiveness of public policy rendered such a divide.

Digital Divide and Gender Inequalities

The digital divide has also affected, increased and exposed the gender inequalities prevailing in Pakistan. According to the Mobile Gender Gap Report 2019, Pakistan is found to have the widest mobile ownership gender gap, where women have a 37% less chance of owning a mobile phone than men.⁹ On the scale of mobile internet penetration, Pakistan lies the lowest among Asian countries.¹⁰ All of this is visible in the rural areas of Pakistan, where the concept of formal education for women is considered as a taboo even today. This inaccessibility to the internet also disallows women to take benefit from informal educational initiatives in the form of skills development. Hence, it is seen that women of Pakistan lack necessary online skills for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) education.

Digital Divide and COVID-19

Since the fight against COVID-19 is still going on, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the social imbalance as far as the digital divide is concerned. This

⁸ "The Impact of Universal Service Funds on Fixed-Broadband Deployment and Internet Adoption in Asia and the Pacific," *United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific*, last modified October 2017, <https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Universal%20Access%20and%20Service%20Funds%20final.pdf>.

⁹ Oliver Rowntree, *Connected Women: The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2019*, GSMA, last modified February 2019, <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/GSMA-Connected-Women-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2019.pdf>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

pandemic rendered students and professionals to “Work from Home” or “Remote Work” formats. Also, it is an open fact that big cities in Pakistan intake students and professionals from the rural parts of the country where access to the internet is not readily available. Against this backdrop, students upon their own initiative ran a campaign against online classes, since a stark shift from regular classes to online lecturing proved to be a daunting task for them. Social media also saw campaign with hashtag #ShameOnTelecomSector demanding for subsidised internet packages for students and professionals.¹¹ Following the imposition of lockdown in Pakistan, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority noticed an increase of 15% in Pakistan’s internet traffic.¹² This increase in internet traffic demands the up-gradation of technological infrastructure to accommodate the ever-increasing traffic to far flung areas of Pakistan.

Digital Divide and Human Rights Organisations

In Pakistan, human rights organisations are working for the betterment of the society not only in the domain of basic human rights but also in the domain of digital rights. Digital Rights Foundation in Pakistan is working for internet safety and accessibility.¹³ They also advocate for online freedom of expression as well as the rights pertaining to the privacy of women in relation to the minority communities. Another organisation which is also very active in the said domain of digital rights is “Bolo Bhi” (Speak up), a civil society organisation that works for the advocacy, policy, and research in the domain of digital rights as well as a civic responsibility.¹⁴ They advocate the participation of civil society of Pakistan in the freedom of speech and online privacy so that the digital space can be utilised for civic and political engagements by all the communities of the society.

Digital Divide as a Threat to Pakistan

Digital divide, by its apparent value, does not seem so threatening to the society of Pakistan. However, it is actually the opposite of it. The threat it poses resides in the non-traditional domain, and it is the least catered

¹¹ Hija Kamran, “Digital Rights Monitor: Coronavirus crisis highlights digital divide in Pakistan,” *Association For Progressive Communications*, last modified March 27, 2020, <https://www.apc.org/en/news/digital-rights-monitor-coronavirus-crisis-highlights-digital-divide-pakistan>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ “Help Making the Internet Safer & More Accessible,” *Digital Rights Foundation*, accessed June 15, 2020, <https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/>.

¹⁴ “About Us,” *Bolo Bhi*, accessed June 15, 2020, <https://bolobhi.org/about-us/>.

for as far as the hybridity of threats is concerned.¹⁵ In contemporary times, social cohesion and social engineering move hand in hand. On the one hand, these threats provoke the discriminated elements of the society towards violence and social unrest. While on the other, the same internet accessibility can be used to spread disinformation and chaos in society. This critically brings us to the fact that these services alone cannot incorporate social cohesion in a society unless the marginalised communities are brought forth to the leading social strata of the country. Especially in the days of COVID-19 pandemic, where social interaction has been replaced by social distancing, the digital divide provides an epic case to study from the perspective of Pakistan, in order to overcome it as a non-traditional threat.

Moreover, as Pakistan, like other states, has moved towards online education and remote learning, this would also bring out the digital divide between rural and urban areas of the country. Social engineering, on the other hand, is also taking place all over the world by the use or misuse of digital devices. However, it was once used by physical means and actors on the ground to manipulate adversary’s fault lines. But in contemporary times, it includes the digital space that can spark events in the real world. So these threats cannot be mitigated unless there is a public-private partnership within a state.

As of now, in Pakistan and almost all over the world, the rights movements, including digital rights are usually led by non-governmental organisations and civil society. The human rights ministry in Pakistan can work in this regard by partnering with the private sector. This partnership should be two-fold. One should be on the expansion of digital rights across the landscape of Pakistan, both in technical aspect as well as societal aspect. The other thing that needs imminent attention is the use of these digital spaces not just to equalise rights, but also to invoke entrepreneurial approach that would increase gross domestic product (GDP) of Pakistan which is specifically debated in the concluding part.

Recommendations

Following recommendations are necessary to decrease the digital divide in Pakistan:

- There should be a public-private partnership for digital rights in Pakistan.
- The human rights ministry must take active

¹⁵ “World at war: US force projection and the hybridity of global threats,” *Defence & Security*, last modified December 15, 2016, <http://www.defence-and-security.com/features/featurehybridity-of-threats-5711034/>.

participation in policy formulation for digital rights and the digital divide.

- The digital divide must be understood in the greater context of non-traditional domains in tandem with linking it to the hybridity of threats in the 21st century.
- The digital divide, if only understood from the perspective of human rights, will not be a viable engagement. The entrepreneurial approach demands true settings of digital rights.
- The role of research and development sector is the most important for the utilisation of digital spaces and abrogation of the digital divide.

Conclusion

The digital divide and digital rights do not complement each other due to obvious reasons. The state machinery, not generally all over the world, but also in Pakistan is oblivious of the fact that digital rights are also part and parcel of the greater set of human rights. However, those who understand the power and nature of digital space use it for their heinous designs of authoritarian control. Human rights in Pakistan have not been a popular subject of academia and state machinery, despite too many voices being raised. The state practices in the past are also evidence of this fact. So is the case with the digital divide. But this digital divide is somewhat a novel idea within the realm of human rights. The debate of digital divide in Pakistan is not only about the haves and have-nots of the internet, it more so revolves around the innovation and entrepreneurial approach that these platforms and digital spaces present themselves with. This is the vacuum that needs to be tapped. This would not only encompass the debate of digital divide but at the same time, it would also increase the understanding and knowledge base that is necessary for the 21st century GDP trends. The less the digital divide; the more opportunities can be provided for the marginalised communities and geographical locations, towards the digitalisation of Pakistan.