

Point: Australia's Unacceptably Wide Digital Divide May Worsen

Thesis: Digital inequality remains a stubborn problem in Australia, and the combined impacts of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and technological advances may exacerbate it.

Talking Points

- The groups that suffer from digital exclusion are the same as they have been in the past and include older Australians and those from regional areas, among others.
- Experts believe that the increasing shift to online activity driven by COVID-19 is creating further difficulties for the digitally excluded.
- Likewise, ostensibly promising technological developments, such as the government's expansion of high-speed broadband networks and the introduction of 5G technology, may work to further disadvantage groups on the wrong side of the digital divide.

Summary

Statistics show that Australia's digital divide remains a major problem, and some experts believe the gap between the 'haves' and 'have nots' may increase. In April 2020, during the early period of the COVID-19 crisis, academics Chris Wilson and Jo Barraket pointed to existing inequalities and warned that those were being exacerbated by the impact of the pandemic. 'Digital inequality', they wrote, 'follows distinct geographic, demographic, and socio-economic contours. In summary, rural Australians, older Australians, members of low-income households, people with low educational attainment, those not in the labour force, Indigenous Australians and Australians with disability all record substantially lower than average [digital inclusion] scores'. They noted that the digital transformation driven by COVID was creating greater efficiencies but expressed concern about its uneven outcomes, noting that 'for the digitally excluded—people lacking effective and affordable internet access and digital skills—the transition is deepening social inequality'.

The federal government's planned initiative aimed at closing the gap by upgrading Australia's National Broadband Network (NBN) from copper-wire to fibre-optic technology met with criticism, however. Critics such as Mark Gregory, a professor in network engineering, remarked that the move would actually

increase digital inequalities. Gregory told *The New Daily* that users would only be able to access the new infrastructure if they paid for more expensive broadband plans—and that would be impossible for many on low incomes. Similar anxieties have been expressed about the much-publicised rollout of high-speed 5G wireless technology, which represents an improvement on existing mobile networks. For example, in 2020 a federal parliamentary committee expressed concern 'that 5G will not be rolled out to regional areas until urban areas have been fully serviced'. The committee also received a submission from a consumer advocacy group that warned that while 5G technology may have useful applications for vulnerable people, such improvements might not be affordable.

Ponder This

- The author has presented the fundamental positions for this perspective in the debate. Outline the strengths and weaknesses of each perspective.
- If asked to begin forming an argument for this position, what sources would you need to build your case? What fundamental information do you need? What opinion leaders in this debate would you look to in solidifying your argument?
- What are the weakest aspects of the position outlined by the author? How might those weaker arguments help you prepare a counter argument?
- What additional Talking Points could you add to support this position?

Bibliography

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