

Internet, Society and Design Justice

The Covid-19 pandemic has opened up the wounds of digital inequality even further. The drastic change in the way schools and businesses operate has augmented the division between the privileged and poverty-stricken people. The internet and its associated technologies have become a necessity rather than a luxury. Access to the internet is now a prerequisite to effective communication and making a sustainable living. The natural selection that Charles Darwin wrote about is being played out by humans within the digital space. Survival of the richest is the new norm and only those under the shade of money trees have been able to prosper.

The roots of this inequality can be traced back to the invention of the internet and the geographical limitations that emerged from it. Graham et al[1] analyses how the geographical limitations of information access in the past led to the information discrepancies in countries across the globe. Africa is described as “being left in a digital apartheid”. The political manoeuvres of the past attempted to conceal the great technological strides from those who were deemed unworthy of this information. The impact of this information secrecy is the source of division that we see in society. “We must rapidly begin the shift from a “thing-oriented” society to a “person-oriented” society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered” – Martin Luther King Jr. This statement clarifies the reason for not only the inequality of the past, but also the division we see today. The motives of powerful people were inherited from those who raised them. This has created a domino effect on the global inequality of technological resources. This has been an issue for decades; however its prominence has been revealed to us by the global pandemic. According to UNESCO, approximately 80% of the 1.5 billion students affected by school closures do not have access to a computer [2 : Tataki and Glynos]. This statistic is exacerbating the inequality we currently see and will continue to set this theme for the future unless society acts upon it. Furthermore, the mass migration to the digital space has made internet access a basic need for socio-economic inclusion.

Inequality within countries: The inequality of income within countries is also a reason for the augmentation of digital separation. Disadvantaged groups and people who live in rural areas have more limited Internet access. This is due to both the lack of affordability and infrastructure. Once again, this causes a ripple effect for the disadvantaged people. These people have been given an anchor that prevents them from being pushed forward by the sails of the digital era.

Inequality between countries: The low Internet access in emerging and developing countries causes them to be vulnerable to socio-economic exclusion. The majority of Sub-Saharan African countries have an internet penetration of less than 10% with no significant growth in recent years [1]. The reason for this is that the cost of internet access transcends the average income in these countries. As an absolute value, the cost of the internet is relatively low, however, as a relative value the cost reaches as high as 250% of the average income. The past information geography of these African countries formed the basis for the lack of information access we see today.

We can see from the discussion above that the distribution of internet access causes inequality. The question that arises is what about the internet itself. If the internet was accessible to everyone then would it really ‘make the world a better place?’ To answer this question, we need to think about what makes up the data seen on the internet. The answer : People. It is fair to conclude that

communication will definitely be improved by giving the world access to the infinite possibilities of the internet. However, will this become the Trojan horse of society? Approximately 32% of American believe that Facebook has a negative impact on society[3]. On the other end of the scale , the internet provides a means of communication , shopping , business opportunities, education and many more. So is it good or bad ? I believe that it can be both. People can use a hammer to construct amazing architecture or to tear it down. The hammer is a tool for construction or destruction. The same goes for the internet. It can be an amazing asset for creating a more efficient society. However, it is up to society to build or destroy. The inequalities of the past may never be equalized however, the gap between digital inequality can definitely be reduced. I believe that simply providing affordable access to those communities and countries that need it will allow their people to learn, communicate and grow. The internet can be our garden of Eden, as long as we stay away from the bad apples.

- 1) Graham, M., De Sabbata, S. and Zook, M. A. (2015) 'Towards a study of information geographies: (im)mutable augmentations and a mapping of the geographies of information, *Geo: Geography and Environment*, 2(1), pp. 88–105. doi: 10.1002/geo2.8
- 2) Tataki and Glynos, n.d. Sign in to your account. [online] Ulwazi.wits.ac.za. Available at: <<https://ulwazi.wits.ac.za/courses/34216/pages/research-internet-society-and-design-justice>> [Accessed 1 June 2022].
- 3) Wagner, K., 2022. *Is the internet good or bad for society? Americans are having a tough time deciding..* [online] Vox. Available at: <<https://www.vox.com/2018/5/6/17320766/internet-good-bad-society-pew-research-impact-facebook-amazon>> [Accessed 1 June 2022].