

## Chapter XII

# The Digital Divide in Australia: Is Rural Australia Losing Out?

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## Abstract

*In this chapter, the authors examine the problem of the digital divide in Australia, drawing substantially on a study by carried out for the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) government by the authors. While this study was limited to the ACT region, many of the findings are relevant to rural areas across Australia as well, and also to rural areas of other developed countries. The authors conclude that there is a digital divide problem in Australia, and discuss some initiatives taken to date to address the problem.*

## Introduction

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In the last decade, information and communication technologies have rapidly become integral to most, if not all aspects of society in developed countries. Electronic communication networks within Australia, the developed country considered in this chapter, connect various levels of government, many households, most education institutions, many non-government organizations, and almost all commercial organizations. These networks are used for a wide range of information- and communication-based activities, for both work and leisure purposes. They may either supplement or supplant alternative means of conducting many activities, such as face-to-face, telephonic or printed communication.

The introduction of new information and communication technologies has the potential to bring significant benefits to many members of society, and many have already benefited substantially. Benefits include savings in both time and money for businesses, government, non-government organizations and individuals; new opportunities for education (formal and informal), employment and entertainment; new means of communicating with other people; and new and more comprehensive sources of information than have previously been available.

However, as many studies and reports document, not all members of society have access to these new technologies, or to the benefits they bring. This phenomenon is generally known as the “digital divide.” However it is defined, the digital divide marks a gap, more or less clearly delineated, between those people who have a high level of access to certain new information and communication technologies, and those people who have little or no access to those technologies. As new information and communication technologies become increasingly prevalent and integral to life in developed countries such as Australia, those who lack access to them become further disadvantaged, since information and services are provided increasingly, and sometimes even solely, via the new technologies. The following are commonly cited examples of goods and services that are only available (or only cheaply available) by means of the new information and communication technologies:

- Many jobs are only advertised online, or can only be applied for online, and those who apply online may have an advantage of timeliness over those who cannot do so.
- Many commercial services (e.g., airline tickets, banking and financial services) are available only online, or available at a significant discount online.
- Some government information is available only online, is easier to access online, or is cheaper to access online, than by other means.
- Some community consultation services (provided by government, or sub-contracted to private providers) are available only online for members of

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