Chapter 83
Social Equity, the Digital Divide and E-Governance:
An Analysis of E-Governance Initiatives in India

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ABSTRACT

This chapter critically assesses how e-government initiatives in India are attempting to contend with social equity issues posed by the deepening digital divide and draws conclusions regarding the value and reach of e-government initiatives. The chapter summarizes current understandings of the digital divide, and uses those understandings to develop a characterization of those constituents who are not reached by e-government initiatives and services. The chapter asserts that those who do not have the ability to access and use ICT are excluded from using e-government initiatives and services, and discusses examples of actions that begin to mitigate the social equity effects of the digital divide.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter critically assesses how e-government initiatives in India are attempting to contend with social equity issues posed by the deepening digital divide and draws conclusions regarding the value and reach of e-government initiatives.

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In order to fulfill these objectives, the chapter first summarizes current understandings of the digital divide, and uses those understandings to develop a characterization of those constituents who are not reached by e-government websites and services. The global digital divide is defined here to mean the gap between those who have the ability to access and use information and communication technology (ICT) and those who

do not. These individuals who fall on either side of the digital divide are characterized by differences in personal wealth, demographics such as race and gender, levels of education and literacy, and access to ICT (Chary & Aikins, 2009). The chapter asserts that those who do not have the ability to access and use ICT are excluded from using e-government websites and services. In this, the chapter aims to contribute to the overall understanding of the digital divide as a critical global phenomenon that affects the value and applicability of e-governance.

Second, the chapter critically analyzes Indian e-governance initiatives against those dimensions to draw conclusions regarding the value, reach and applicability of those initiatives, especially in a social equity context. The chapter attempts to contribute to our overall understanding of how to use social equity concerns in a world characterized by a deep and wide digital divide and to evaluate and perhaps enhance the reach of e-government websites. Finally, the chapter draws conclusions regarding how well existing e-governance has addressed digital divide issues and makes recommendations on how those attempts may be further enhanced.

Based on currently held definitions in the literature (Bagchi, 2005; Chinn & Fairlie, 2007; James, 2004; others), the global digital divide is defined here to mean the gap between those who have the ability to access and use information and communication technology (ICT) and those who do not. This chapter limits its discussion to computer-based Internet technologies. Although other communication technologies – such as mobile telephony -- have a significant influence on how people can get information and remain connected, this chapter focuses on the Internet aspect of ICT as being most relevant to e-governance.

The digital divide, and how it affects access to ICT, is a fundamental social equity issue. In fact, it might well be the greatest social equity challenge in today's flattened and globalized world where world events are shared online before they are spread through traditional communication channels. In the aftermath of the Iranian election of 2009, the state effectively shut down all traditional journalistic coverage of the bloody protests. In the past, such actions would have effectively blocked the flow of all information to the outside world. In 2009, however, details, images and videos of protests and police actions were still shared with the world through YouTube™, Twitter™ and (we) blogs. People in Iran with the ability to access and use ICT – those on the "have" side of the digital divide – had the ability to receive life-saving information, while those outside Iran were able to monitor and disseminate current information. Those without access to ICT were left in the dark, literally when the television media were blacked out and metaphorically as they had no access to information.

In a less dramatic though no less important context, individuals who have access to and can use ICT have more avenues to easily educate themselves on the range of government resources and services available to them and to determine their eligibility for government programs. Unfortunately, the very people who generally suffer from lack of access to ICT (those with low personal wealth, low levels of education and literacy) are usually the same constituents who are eligible for many government assistance programs, especially means-tested ones. As such, unless governments actively mitigate the effects of the digital divide, e-governance initiatives will exclude the very constituents that programs are mandated to reach.

BACKGROUND

The methodology used is a case study. The cases in question are the e-government websites and initiatives from both state and central/federal governments in India, with case vignettes from the United States used for some comparisons. At first glance, the digital divide seems to manifest in radically different ways in each country. In