

# Chapter 17

## Rural–Urban Digital Divide in Romania

**Virgil Stoica**

*Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Romania*

**Andrei Ilas**

*Independent Researcher, Romania*

### ABSTRACT

*The last two decades witnessed the sudden raise in importance of Information and Communications Technology (ICT). Some societies have been quick to embrace the benefits of ICT, while others have used the new technologies in a rather limited way. A new term, “digital divide,” was coined to describe the gap between the societies using ICT on a large scale and those with limited access. Much was written with respect to the causes of this gap. Factors such as socioeconomic conditions, geographical position, tradition, social and individual values are considered to play major roles in the creation of the digital divide. The vast majority of the studies have focused on the digital performance of cities with far less attention being paid to what was happening in the villages. Arguably, the villages would greatly benefit, and the existent data shows that in many societies a significant rural-urban digital divide is already in place. The goal of this chapter is to assess the urban-rural digital divide in Romania in terms of official website performances by evaluating five components: security and personal data protection, usability, content, type of services, and digital democracy. The authors conclude that in Romania the rural-urban digital divide is extremely large. Based on their conclusions, they offer suggestions for future studies and policies.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

It is obvious today that the information and communications technology (ICT) is restructuring the way our societies function. Under its influence, traditionally conservative areas are rapidly transforming (Susskind, 2008) and the very nature of

industrial production is changed with the users taking part in the products making (Bruns, 2008).

During the last two decades, e-governance rapidly advanced on the public agendas as it brought fresh promises of bureaucratic quickness and transparency. However, beyond the collective consensus that these promises are essential to a

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good administration, there are numerous views with respect to the implementation of ICT and its side-effects. For example, although a country may be able to make impressive e-government progresses in a very short period of time (Misuraca et al., 2010), this could lead to a “re-ordering of the state’s administrative structures and of government itself” (Lanzara, 2009) with unpredictable short and long-term consequences.

Despite its possible disruptive effect, the ICT is not arriving on an empty field and its effect should not be overestimated. The current features of administrations around the world had been drawn by the fiscal crisis of the 70’s who invited the governments to “work better and cost less” (Denhardt, 2008). This finally led to the development of the New Public Management (NPM) that focused on providing public services using a business approach. Recently, the shortcomings of the NPM and the opportunities offered by ITC encouraged scholars to announce the NPM’s death (Dunleavy et al., 2006) soon to be replaced by an ‘e-paradigm’. At almost a decade after this bold announcement, the e-paradigm did not entirely replaced the old one, a sign that the transformation of bureaucracies around the world is rather incremental.

The e-governance is actually only one phenomenon in a much larger technological revolution that is transforming the very structure of our societies. While some societies fully embarked for this new ‘industrial’ adventure, others seem to prefer a limited use of the new technologies. As it has been the case throughout the entire modern history in the advent of new technologies, new disparities among societies are created. A new term, digital divide, has been coined to describe the newly appeared “gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels with regard both to their opportunities to access information and communication technologies and to their use of the

Internet for a wide variety of activities”(OECD, 2001). Put differently, the digital divide is about opportunities created or missed by having or using the new technology.

No doubt that in the “knowledge era” the ICT access is vital, but one should not fall in the trap of a technological determinism when explaining the digital divide (Malecki & Moriset, 2008). Indeed, when approaching the digital divide one should not overlook the classic discussion on social inequalities. In fact, the literature studying the ICT related evolutions has proved that the same ‘old’ factors are playing the significant in this phenomenon too. For instance, having internet connections at home is influenced by income, education, age, race and ethnicity (Mossberger, 2003). Also, while the gender is not reflected into an Internet access divide, the men tend to use more the Internet than the women (Fallows, 2005). The traditional difference between rural and urban is also reflected especially in developing countries where the rural access to Internet represents a problem (Mahan, 2007).

Out of the above literature review we may assert at a theoretical level that the tendency should be for the digital divide to mirror the social inequalities within a society. This is why we should probably agree that if the digital divide do not create, perpetuate or exacerbate social inequalities, the government intervention should not be considered a necessity (Rooksby & Weckert, 2004). In other words, closing the digital divide should be not possible without diminishing other persistent inequalities.

From this perspective, a comprehensive research on digital divide should always try to correlate the digital inequalities with other social inequalities. However, our research objective is more modest, to evaluate the urban - rural digital divide in Romania, in terms of official websites performances

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