

Chapter 58

Social Inclusion and the Digital Divide: Case of Korea

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ABSTRACT

It is becoming more important to better utilize various resources as digital convergence and informatization progresses. Therefore, it is a necessity to show the qualitative differences regarding digital divide, and relevant policies and efforts need to be strengthened to narrow the digital divide. In this regard, the overall improvement of information literacy of the public is required as it can increase the convenience in citizens' everyday lives and can create added value. It is, therefore, necessary to continue the development of policies and projects to narrow the digital divide. The Korean government plans to keep strengthening its support with policies to legislate regulations that narrow the digital divide and provide fair opportunities to access information and to improve information literacy. The efforts to narrow the digital divide and effective policies to achieve the goal must be continued to relieve social conflict and integrate the society. This is explored in this chapter.

INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have developed since the late 20th century, rapidly changing the lives and ways of thinking of mankind and ushering in the information society with a wholly new paradigm that differs from the existing industrial society qualitatively. The information society is meaningful in itself when the social value of information gets higher, and the socialization of information is realized. In

other words, the realization of an ideal information society depends on how a change there is in individuals' perception, attitude, values, and behaviors that harmonize with changes in the information environment. However, as the penetration and usage of ICTs, including the Internet have increased, the digital divide, one of the side effects, has emerged as a social issue.

The widening of the digital divide causes the gap in information literacy and economic activity, which, in turn, leads to inequality in opportunities

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of communication and participation, hindering social inclusion and damaging social values and foundation needed to enter the line of advanced countries. Bridging the digital divide has become an important informatization policy area for both the strengthening of national competitiveness and social welfare. The digital divide brings about and increases inequality among classes and regions, and reduces the economic and social benefits created as a result of ICT development. A country therefore needs to consider the issue as a national challenge and approach it from the perspective of balanced growth and inclusion.

Korea has developed and promoted timely informatization plans in line with the global informatization trend in efforts to become an ICT-based advanced country. Additionally, it has actively promoted e-government programs since 2001 with aims to improve the efficiency and transparency of government administration and to dramatically enhance services for the public and businesses. As a result of such efforts, the ICT industry has become a key driver in Korea's overall competitiveness. E-government programs have changed the living environment of the public, but at the same time, caused problems related to the groups that have obstacles in using ICTs. In this regard, the government has endeavored to resolve the digital divide and other problems that can be raised as informatization spreads across the country by promoting policies to improve accessibility for the public and a paradigm shift in informatization.

This article examines the current status in terms of informatization and the digital divide in Korea, and studies policy measures to resolve the digital divide or information inequality. Furthermore, it tries to prove that the measures will not only narrow the digital divide but also contribute to social inclusion.

CURRENT STATUS AND ANALYSIS MODEL OF DIGITAL DIVIDE

Concept of Digital Divide

The concept of the digital divide can be defined in various ways, depending on the subjects, levels, etc.

First, the OECD defines the digital divide as the gap in the information infrastructure, and approaches the global digital divide with four indicators: access to ICTs and the Internet; the price of access; using the Internet; alternative Internet access (OECD, 2001, pp.12-23).

While the World Bank (2001) suggests the effective management of technology investment capital as a solution to the global digital divide, APEC approaches the digital disparity from the perspective of the information technology gap. The digital divide is also explained as the "gap in access to information devices". Jin Sang-gi (2003) defines the global digital divide as the "gap in the infrastructure, use, and accessibility with regard to information and communications among individual countries as a result of different national informatization levels."

When comprehensively considering the concepts discussed above, the digital divide refers to the "gap between people who obtain and use information through computers and those who do not" in a narrow sense, and the "phenomenon that inequality in information acquisition causes the disparity of wealth" in a broad sense. In this regard, there are a few things to know in relation to the concepts.

First of all, there is a need to recognize the digital divide by separating people in a dichotomous way, namely those who enjoy the benefits of information and those who do not. In other words, the divide between the two groups is not

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