

Digital Equity: How businesses should think about the digital divide

As an owner of a digital marketing agency, I largely see the world from the perspective of the digital space. I see everything as being available online, but I am increasingly coming to see this as a perspective driven by a position of privilege.

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I am in my 40s and most of my adult life has been dominated by the online space. I remember first getting internet access at home in the late 1990s. We began to explore the internet earlier than many and I was fortunate that my parents - who although not particularly computer literate themselves - had the foresight to see the online world would be an important space for their children to be familiar with.

A lot has happened in the 20-odd years since our family's dial-up modem first screeched and hissed its online handshakes and a lot of progress has been made to close the digital divide over that time.

When I first started stumbling around the web, I was part of less than 1% of the global population with access to the internet. In 2021 around 65% of the world's population is online. That's huge uptake of a new technology, but there is still some way to go.

In the UK, as one of the leading developed nations of the world, we are doing much better with around 95% of the population being connected in some capacity. Smartphones have hugely increased uptake of the

internet with around 90% of the UK's population able to access the internet via a smartphone. This looks like we're doing well, but it masks some concerning issues around opportunities and social justice.

Whilst the digital divide was originally about the accessibility of the internet, these days it's about so much more. Because it's not just about if you can get on the internet, but it's about the technology you're able to use to access the internet; your understanding and confidence in using the software that the internet relies on; your uptake of technology such as the internet of things, how much you engage in social media platforms or e-democracy. All of these factors - and more - determine your levels of digital equity.

I recently began to understand the real struggle of digital inequity. We are incredibly fortunate to live in an old farmhouse just off the beautiful East Lancashire moors, however, this does come with its problems. It has taken me around 7 years to get fibre broadband installed to our house. Trying to run our digital marketing agency, *GrowTraffic* during lockdown - from home - on a slow internet connection has been a painful experience. Having managed to get fibre broadband installed, whilst it has greatly improved my connectivity, it has highlighted new issues that I was unaware of.

One issue I've experienced since we've had our superfast broadband installed is whilst the broadband is fast, the upload speed isn't. This is because the physical network is designed to deliver really fast download speeds and the upload speeds are less important. Whilst download speed is essential for watching TV at home over the internet, it is upload speeds that are often the most important for a creative business. The further away from a town or city you are, the more likely you are to experience these kinds of issues. By and large, the people who live in more remote areas are people who exist on lower incomes and who have higher living costs due to the lower levels of infrastructure, when compared to a city.

The digital divide isn't just about the demographics of individuals, whether that be based on age, race, orientation, disability etc. It's also about households, businesses and geographic areas.

As the world moves towards relying on greater levels of creativity to generate value and wealth, these inequities - which are relatively invisible in many ways - will increasingly affect the way our global economy is shaped and this will determine who the winners and losers will be. Perhaps for generations to come.

So what has this got to do with business and why is the owner of a digital agency pontificating about digital equity? That's because I believe digital equity is something that every business should focus on addressing and it's from my position in the digital sector that I believe I can see certain trends and situations that need addressing.

It's not good enough to say education alone is for the government to deal with. Because how do they know what we need our workforce to be able to do? And when you're dealing with a revolutionary technology such as the internet and its associated tech, how could the government ever create an educational programme that could keep up?

It's for businesses to engage with education providers and training providers, as well as local, regional and national government, to develop programmes for their employees and for the broader community. It's through this engagement and interaction that we can hope to establish a workforce that has the basic understanding - and more broadly the required flexibility - to thrive and excel in the digital age.

I've tried to help in some ways. I've created short programmes to be taught at local schools and I've tried to engage with local organisations to bring relevant knowledge to local youngsters, but I'm aware more needs to be done and that means more businesses need to engage.

As I noted earlier, it's only recently that I've begun to understand there is a nuance to the way that technology is implemented, which can also have an effect on the way people are able to access the digital space, or at least the way they are able to access it when compared to others.

My experiences of upload speeds are just one example of this. These upload speeds are an example of a less visible problem. Everyone understands the concept of internet speeds, but not many would understand there is a difference between download speeds and upload speeds. Fewer still would understand this has an impact on the types of businesses we're trying to encourage in the new digital age, and fewer still again would appreciate that this is determined by the physical infrastructure of our telephone and broadband network, which is increasingly geared towards streaming.

As businesses, we must increase our understanding and literacy of the digital technology that provides the infrastructure of the digital age so we can better hold the providers, local authorities and national governments to account. We must start thinking about digital infrastructure in the same way we think about the transport and utility networks, it's not as visible but it's probably even more important as we increasingly advance in the 4th industrial revolution.

Ultimately though, this is about what type of global community we want to be and what we believe will create the best sort of society for our future. More than that, it's about people and about equality of opportunity. My moral compass tells me this is where we as business owners should focus our emphasis because this offers the best opportunities for people, society, the economy and each of our individual businesses.

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