DIGITAL INEQUITY: BRIDGING THE GAP

With the surge in internet subscription costs, internet accessibility becomes more pressing than ever.

Consider a scenario in which your ability to stream a favorite show or join a virtual meeting becomes a financial balancing act. Welcome to an everyday dilemma for many Canadians—a nation with some of the highest internet prices among G7 countries. While the Government of Canada acknowledges "affordable high-speed internet is essential", the cost of internet access remains a persistent concern, particularly for equity-deserving groups such as low-income households.

Following a 2024 announcement by Rogers to raise the prices for some wireless phone plans, Canadians have voiced their concern over affordability of cellphone and home internet subscriptions. Through mergers and acquisitions, the Canadian market has three dominant carriers (Bell, Rogers, Telus). This concentrated market structure raises concerns about impacts on consumer choice and pricing. Accessibility of digital connectivity in Canada requires a critical reflection, particularly following pandemic lockdowns which saw many services shift permanently online. It means the internet has become our lifeline.

The modern era of digitalization grants enormous opportunities while resulting in the systematic exclusion of vulnerable Canadians.

Despite federal programs, such as the Universal Broadband Fund (UBF) to enhance high-speed internet access across Canada, many households still lack broadband access or have internet services that fall short of the CRTC's recommended 50 Mbps/10 Mbps universal service objective, in place since 2016. The consequences of this digital divide are profound, especially for equity-deserving groups, including the elderly, low-income households, persons with disabilities, racial minorities, and Indigenous Peoples.

Recent research by the authors uncovers the cross-dimensional barriers of the digital divide — accessibility, affordability, literacy and the availability of culturally appropriate content and services (Table 1).

Table 1. Digital inequity - Vulnerable groups and reported barriers

Equity-deserving groups	Most reported barriers
Low-income households	Lack of access to the internet, lack of digital skills.
Older adults	Lack of technological skills, digital literacy, fear, safety concerns.
Indigenous groups	Lack of access to the internet, digital skills
Racial and ethnic minorities	Lack of access to the internet.
Newcomers/ New immigrants and refugees	Lack of access to the internet, lack of accessible contents in different languages.
Persons with disabilities	Internet cost, language barriers, digital skills, and lack of accessible content.
Women	Technological knowledge, internet access, online safety.

Combined, these factors exacerbate digital inequity. A person of low-income, for example, may face obstacles accessing reliable high-speed internet due to prohibitively high costs. The lack of affordability for suitable devices may further hinder their digital participation and access to education and employment opportunities.

Recognizing and addressing digital inequity from multiple angles has become a critical academic and policy endeavour.

To address Canada's digital divide, investment is needed from multiple orders of government to support cost-effective broadband internet connections as well as targeted support for programs, training to bridge the digital divide and increased availability of content in various languages. Promotion of culturally appropriate online and offline training, human-centred digital services, and community-led digital literacy initiatives are also required to enhance affordability and accessibility of online participation for equity-deserving groups.

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