

Digital divides persist in New Zealand

September 28 2015, by Miriam Lips

Digital technologies have become critical for people to participate in education, work, health provision, social services, tax services and commercial activities. Yet some groups of our population have limited or no access to digital technologies, or do not have the confidence to use them.

Research shows that the most digitally-excluded groups are adults with disabilities, children with special needs, Pasifika, Māori, senior citizens, people from low socio-economic backgrounds, and those living in regions or communities with low [internet](#) uptake rates.

For example, the 2013 Census revealed that a total of 62,000 families with dependent children do not have access to the internet in their homes, with more than 28 percent of these families living in south Auckland and Gisborne, and more than 32 percent in the Far North and eastern Bay of Plenty. This is an extremely concerning situation at a time when children are expected to do their homework via the internet.

These families are typically in low income communities with a high proportion of Māori and Pasifika: only 55 percent of families with an annual household income of between \$10k and \$20k, 65 percent of Pasifika peoples, and 68 percent of Māori have internet access at home.

It is often assumed that digital divides will disappear over time, as more and more people will have grown up in the digital age. Also, Information and Communications Technology (ICT) infrastructure is a priority of this Government, with over \$1.5 billion being invested in the rollout of

ultra-fast broadband and rural broadband. However, research shows continuing divides between 'digital-rich' and 'digital-poor' people in New Zealand society, with the latter usually belonging to the seven digitally-excluded groups mentioned above.

One important reason for being digitally-excluded is the cost involved with using [digital technologies](#) in New Zealand. Even a subsidised internet connection, which requires a weekly contribution of \$10, is something a substantial number of families cannot afford.

Another important reason is that a lack of knowledge or skills leads to a lack of confidence and lower trust in internet use. Also, having internet access is no guarantee it will be used, or of people's willingness to provide their personal details via online channels.

This is demonstrated for example by considering 2012 research that found 76 percent of people between 65 and 74 years of age had internet access at home, but only 61 percent were recent internet users. It also showed that 52 percent of people 75 years and over had internet at home but only 32 percent had recently used it.

We know from experience in Scandinavian countries that many [senior citizens](#) do not have the confidence or skills to provide personal details via the internet as a result of illnesses causing memory loss, for example. Also, although many young people are deeply engaged with social media, this does not mean that they inherently have the knowledge or skills to use the internet in a meaningful way.

Furthermore, research conducted in New Zealand shows that people from a range of backgrounds have become more private online over time. For many of them, this means using other channels for exchanging [personal details](#).

Enhancing digital-inclusion for all of New Zealand is of critical importance, if not a basic human right, in a country where public services are increasingly being provided online rather than offline. However, this will require an additional investment alongside the rollout of broadband, to not only better understand the various needs of digitally-excluded and digital-poor New Zealanders, but also to enable their active participation in an increasingly digital society.

Provided by Victoria University

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