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la sección Latina de openDemocracy 

## Digital age inequality in Latin America

**MATÍAS BIANCHI** 24 June 2015

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*Many experts consider that the Internet is capable of transforming our societies into more equal, inclusive and participatory democracies. However, what we see in practice is that the distribution of power, infrastructure and cultural resources in the digital age tends to reflect and even widen pre-existing gaps.*

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The reason is that the Internet, like the printing press or any other technology, is just a tool and its effects depend on the use it is put to by the different social groups. What is certain is that its benefits are plentiful. As technology theorist [Douglas Rushkoff](#) points out in "Program or Be Programmed", the creators and designers of these technologies may shape reality around us and determine the way we live and relate with each other. But the benefits of digital technologies demand more connected and better informed users. According to the International Telecommunication Union, joining the digital world is a complex and comprehensive process, which requires huge investments of financial and institutional resources reaching the most vulnerable regions and social sectors.

Latin America has significant disadvantages here and, barring a real revolution, the cleavages that have historically structured the region will in all likelihood be perpetuated in the digital age: subordinate inclusion in the world, poor territorial integration of countries, and ethnicity and gender-based social marginalization. That is, what remains after the initial enthusiasm of techno utopians is the fact that the challenges today are exactly the same as yesterday.

### Gap 1: Centre-Periphery

First, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), the authority that assigns identifiers, protocols, domains, etc., is legally registered

in California. Furthermore, most of the submarine cable that connects Latin America to the worldwide web, comes from the United States. That country has an enormous capacity to influence the Internet, a capacity that it exercises



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often illegally, as in the obscene espionage cases conducted by the National Security Agency.

There are also differences among Latin American countries. Internet users in the region average 50% of the population - compared to 70% in Europe and 85% in North America

([Internet World Stats](#)). However, whereas in Argentina, Chile, and Brazil the Internet penetration is way over 50%, in Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua it is less than 20%. There are also huge cost differences. The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) has shown how a Megabit per second (Mbps) costs 9 dollars in Mexico while in Bolivia it costs 63 dollars. Put into the perspective of revenue, this means that in Bolivia the cost to have a high-speed connection represents 31% of monthly per capita income, while in Mexico it is only 1%.

Moreover, the majority of the countries in the region enjoy Internet connections of a poorer quality than the world average, which means high costs, deplorable speed and network signals with inadequate reach. In the digital age, the differences between central countries and ours, and between the richer and poorer countries within Latin America itself, are nearly the same than in previous periods in history.

## Gap 2 – Poorly integrated countries

Latin American countries have this in common: they are territorially highly unequal. Sao Paulo's per capita income is 6 times higher than in the northeastern Brazilian state of Piauí; the average income in Mexico City is 5 times higher than in Oaxaca; and Buenos Aires's is 8 times higher than the Formosa's, on the banks of the Paraguay River.

The same happens in the digital age. Urban centres such as Sao Paulo, Buenos Aires, Santiago, Mexico City or Bogotá possess infrastructures and human resources which their country's peripheries lack. Public and private investment is scarce and public policies very poor, much as the quality of education in a public school in Caracas differs widely from that of a school in the Venezuelan South Western state of Apure. Often, the regions do not even relate to each other. Although the vast majority of Latin American innovators, technologists and digital activists do have access to sophisticated and diversified global networks, these have little territorial penetration and connections within their own countries.

## Gap 3 – Between social sectors

Potentially, the digital age provides the tools to connect and create economic opportunities at a very low cost. Imagine the impact it could have for the 174 million Afro-descendants living in the region. It would amount to a social revolution if we bear in mind that in Latin America 92% of Afro-descendants live below the poverty line and even today 35% are illiterate. Think of Colombia, for instance, where the Afro-descendant infant mortality rate is twice the country's average. Or Brazil, where 70% of the country's poor are black and where blacks account for less than 10% of the student population. Imagine also the potential for the 16 million indigenous people living in Mexico, 40% of which in conditions of extreme poverty. Just making it possible for indigenous

and Afro-descendants to harness Internet-related economic and political benefits would directly affect 30% of the population in the region, including the hardest pockets of poverty and exclusion.

Unfortunately, connectivity is determined by socio-economic variables, urbanization, gender, and even ethnic-racial factors. In Brazil, the connectivity for the richest quintile is 75%, while it is only 5% for the poorest quintile. In Ecuador, on the other hand, the richest sections of the population enjoy 100 times more connectivity and of better quality than the poorest. As for the indigenous people, who represent a third of the rural workers in Latin America (60% in Bolivia, 52% in Guatemala and 60% in Peru), access to technology is extremely difficult. The digital divide between indigenous people and the rest of the population in Mexico is .3, whereas in Panama it is .7 and in Venezuela .6. In Mexico, where 70 million have access to the Internet, only 5 million are indigenous people.

As for women, the situation is somewhat different but not drastically so. Chilean sociologist Paulina Pavez has shown that there is greater gender equality among people with the same educational level. However, in impoverished areas or in situations where the woman does not do away-from-home work, the author shows that the gender gap is much higher. Another study shows that in Latin America, the simple fact of being a woman reduces the probability of Internet access by 6%. Children and youth, who represent the future of the region with the world's highest demographic bonus, still lag behind. In Mexico, 70% of the children have no access to the Internet, but if you are an indigenous girl the rate jumps close to 100%.

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So, what profound change can we expect in the digital age if, as we can see, the online gap is equal to or worse than the offline? It should come as no surprise that those most likely to engage in politics through social networks are "the richer, more educated and living in urban areas," according to a Vanderbilt University's **Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP)** survey.

This is why we should not fall into the utopian vision of the Internet's magical powers which supposedly will do away with the existing deep social cleavages in Latin America. We must take a political view, and propound a road map to guide political action and public policy. As Julian Assange put it at the Internet summit in Brazil: "To occupy the Internet is to occupy society." This is where the real transformation is.



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