

Press Release: Digital (Overarching National Release)

Digital connectivity more than doubles during COVID shutdowns in India. But remote work and remote education gains unimpressive

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A recent national survey showed that Internet use had more than doubled in the past four years, and that COVID-related shutdowns contributed significantly to the increased demand for connectivity. Among the aged 15-65 population, 49% said they had used the Internet, compared to only 19% of the aged 15-65 population claiming the same in late 2017. This translates to 61% of households in 2021 using the internet compared to 21% in 2017.

Both surveys were conducted by LIRNEasia, a regional think tank working on digital policy issues. For the 2021, LIRNEasia partnered with ICRIER, an economic policy think tank based out of New Delhi.

The 2021 survey showed that over 130 million users came online in 2020 and 2021. Of the nearly 80 million who started using the internet in 2020, 43% or over 34 million said they started doing so because of needs brought about due to the COVID crisis.

With nearly half the population using the internet, it is natural to ask if the internet helped Indians to study, work and access other services during the various rounds of national, regional and localized lockdowns experienced in 2020 and 2021. We see that digital connectivity indeed helped facilitate access to education, work, health services inter alia.

Sixty four percent (64%) of all households with enrolled school-aged children had internet access while the remaining 36% didn't. Among the first group (households with internet), 31% of children were likely to receive remote education of some kind, while only 8% of the second group (households without internet) said they received some kind of remote education.

A similar trend was seen in accessing healthcare. Among the people that *needed* to access healthcare services during the pandemic, 65% of those with internet access were able to access healthcare while only 52% without internet were able to access healthcare.

But a closer examination of the numbers shows that existing inequalities continued to influence the digital divide. For example, while connected households with kids had more access to remote education, these were the richer, more urban households with a more educated head of household and access to big-screen devices (e.g., computers, tablets). Meanwhile, the majority of the households that received no education were poorer with less access to large screen devices (instead relying on mobile phones).

When it came to being able to work remotely during the shutdowns, only 10% of those employed said they were able to work remotely. Not surprisingly, higher percentages belonged to those whose jobs fell under the categories of finance, insurance, information technology, public administration, and other professional services.

The survey was conducted by LIRNEasia, a regional think tank working on digital policy issues across the Asia Pacific, and ICRIER, a policy-oriented economic policy think tank based out of New Delhi. The survey findings were released at a virtual launch event conducted on 12 November 2021, which included a panel discussion with leading government, private sector and civil society representatives. Panelists included Dr. Jaijit Bhattacharya (President, Centre for Digital Economy Policy Research), Abhishek Singh (President & CEO, National e-Governance Division, Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology), Nishanth Baghel (Director of Technology Innovations, Pratham) and Helani Galpaya (CEO, LIRNEasia). The discussion was moderated by Dr. Rajat Kathuria (Senior Visiting Professor, ICRIER).

“If we only think of people getting connected, India is making great strides. But systematic and structural changes are needed before the real benefits of ‘Digital India’ reach people,” said the CEO of LIRNEasia, Helani Galpaya. “Seven percent of people who did not work from home during the lockdown indicated that they *could* have, but their supervisors didn’t allow it. Workplaces do need to think of modern, hybrid ways of working. Similarly, in education, few schools were ready for remote teaching in the first (2020) lockdowns. Unless digital technology is incorporated into teaching on a day-to-day basis, it is difficult to suddenly start using digital means of teaching during a lockdown or other crisis situation.”

According to Dr. Rajat Kathuria, Senior Visiting Professor at ICRIER, “The survey results confirm what we presumed all along. There has been a huge uptake of digital services during the pandemic much above what trends foretold. That is a positive. What is equally clear however is that the benefits of increased digitalization have been unevenly spread across the geography and population. Trickle down to lower income groups and laggard regions is not a given and will require policy support. For meaningful and relevant societal impact policies must recognize localized socio-economic challenges such as availability of infrastructure, relatable and vernacular content. The journey to digital inclusion must look at an expansive understanding of access which goes beyond laying fibre and providing cheap smartphones-the latter is necessary but certainly not sufficient”

About the research: The research was conducted by LIRNEasia and ICRIER, and funded by IDRC through a joint grant given to three regional think tanks: LIRNEasia, Research ICT Africa and Instituto de Estudios Peruanos. The nationally representative sample for the survey consisted of 7,000 households across India including 350 villages and wards. The sampling methodology has been designed to ensure representation of the target group (population aged 15-65) at a national level with a confidence level of 95-percent and a +/-1.7% margin of error. The data also allows for disaggregation by urban/rural divide, gender and socio-economic classification at the national level and at the state level for 4 focal states, Delhi, Assam, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra.

About LIRNEasia: LIRNEasia is an Asia Pacific ICT policy and regulation think tank. Its mission is to catalyze policy change through research to improve people's lives in the emerging Asia Pacific by facilitating their use of hard and soft infrastructures through the use of knowledge, information and technology.

For more information see <https://lirneasia.net/>

About ICRIER: ICRIER is an autonomous economic policy think tank. ICRIER's main focus is to enhance the knowledge content of policy making by undertaking analytical research that is targeted at informing India's policy makers. The Digital Economy, Startup and Innovation (DESI) team at ICRIER is deeply invested in areas of digital access, internet governance and market competition.

For more information see <http://icrier.org/>

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