OFFLINE AND FALLING BEHIND

A Tale of a College Student

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Eighteen-year-old Pratibha is on the wrong side of the digital divide. The realisation dawned on her in June this year, as she geared up to enroll for an undergraduate programme in the capital. Most top public universities in Delhi have online admission portals that aim to cut out long queues at colleges for application forms, document verifications and fee submission. But for victims of digital inequity, the ostensibly streamlined online admission process is not so easily navigable after all.

First things first. Pratibha comes from a household that has been left behind when it comes to digital inclusion. Her father works a blue collar job while her mother is a domestic help. To own a computer and simultaneously access an internet connection are little more than wishful thinking for her.

So, when she decided to be the first girl in her family to opt for higher studies, the online admission process to undergraduate programmes proved to be too daunting. "I wanted to give up," she recalls. "I did not have an email id to begin with. How would I have manoeuvred the college admission maze?" she adds. The odds were stacked against her. If she didn't manage to secure an admission, she would have to get married. Her parents were concerned about attracting the wrath of community elders.



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Lending her a helping hand was the need of the hour. Since we both have law and engineering degrees under our belts, we assumed we were well-suited to leverage our knowledge of the internet and help Pratibha access its extraordinary opportunities.

But logging on to university admission portals turned out to be challenging even for us, let alone those like Pratibha who have been excluded from the digital revolution. At times, the heavy traffic to the websites ensured inaccessibility while at others the slow loading process made simple tasks seem Herculean. For instance, simply looking up information on course modules and their availability in colleges took hours.

It's true that the going gets tough for the poor, when accessing critical information online. A medley of factors, including lower socio-economic status, negatively impact effective internet usage. Even when the poor have a mobile phone, they lack the know-how to use it to glean beneficial information. An Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development(OECD) research study has indicated how despite spending approximately the same amount of time online, advantaged students were more likely to use the internet to search for information or read news online. On the other hand, disadvantaged students tend to use the internet to chat and play video games.[1] The report is actually based on data collected from more than 40 countries.

In a similar way, Pratibha's unfamiliarity with internet usage had rendered her completely helpless in sourcing relevant admission information. As a

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result, efforts to streamline the circuitous admission process, though commendable, do not always yield the desired results. It makes us re-think whether pushing absolutely everyone to participate online by getting rid of alternative non-digital formats is viable.

Instead, getting affordable internet access to poorer people should be a priority. It already is a global concern. The United Nations, in fact, has made one of its global development goals for 2030 to "significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet."[2]

Till then it's an uphill battle for the likes of Pratibha. We discovered that not being online for a significant part of her life had actually limited both her understanding and interpretation of her academic goals. Confusion prevailed while filling up the application form as well as the subject and college selection. Jargon filled guidelines, unresponsive help desks and unfamiliar online payment gateways also prove to be a mountain of challenges for girls like Pratibha with low digital literacy levels. "At every stage I felt lost," she says.

It's a real effort to prevent Pratibha and her ilk from falling through the gaps in a digitally connected world. There's also a general sense of apathy for the unconnected status of the marginalised and excluded. No one seems to realise that it's an everyday struggle to log in. In fact, Pratibha's teacher at school felt students like her had the most to gain from the extraordinary simplicity of online admissions: "It's quite simple, all you have to do is log into the university portal, fill out the application form, select courses of your choice. Later you will be allotted a college and course. That's it," he said.



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Others like Madam ji, her mother's employer, and even the shopkeeper from whom the family makes daily purchases, echoed similar thoughts. Their sentiments could be summed up as a slogan: "it's online, it's hassle free, it's simple!"

Not only is there no acknowledgement of the hands-on help that the digitally excluded need to benefit from online processes, there's no effort to simplify websites to address a larger demographic. Most admission websites Pratibha came across had distinct technical requirements, such as uploading documents of specific data size. The issue gets compounded as students need to furnish a cornucopia of documents that run the gamut from Aadhar card to marksheets. When residential addresses on official documents don't match, further documentation in the form of affidavits need to be uploaded, merely adding to the woes of the digitally illiterate. The way ahead, therefore, is not to alienate an already disadvantaged group, but to offer a digitally inclusive experience, with simple and succinct online content and information services.

Pratibha's story, is at its heart, the bigger story of a community lacking the skills to access information, a powerful tool for changing its lot. Not surprisingly, the losses for the disconnected can be staggering. Already

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enrollment levels are abysmally low for higher education in the country. According to the recent findings of the NSS 75th round report, nearly 11% Indians hold a graduation degree and above. Of this, in rural areas the number was 6%, while in urban areas it was higher at 22%.[3]

Therefore, shifting admissions processes online without ensuring digital connectivity for all could act as a deterrent to the already pint-sized world of higher education in India.

Make no mistake, linking the swell in the smartphone market with increased digital literacy may not be wise. Increased use of smart phones is also dependant on cheap data plans and reasonably priced cellular devices, all of which are outcomes of the price sensitive and competitive Indian telecom market. More often than not, using a smart phone may not translate into the kind of digital literacy needed to complete a complex application process.

Things can get much worse. Coming to the aid of this marginalised group are intermediaries with access to digital infrastructure and the means to use it. By virtue of their privileged position in this data exchange chain, they have access to sensitive, private information that can be sold or worse, used in other nefarious ways such as identity theft.

If we had not facilitated the online admission process for Pratibha, she would have sought refuge in a cyber café. Along the way, tons of her private data would have been scooped up, including Aadhaar card details, contact number, and even information about her guardian. Her big privacy nightmare would have included stolen email ids, passwords and even bank details since the admission processes only accept online payment.

Today, Pratibha has managed to secure admission at an elite university, but with a lot of hand holding. She could manage to harness the benefits of the Internet for her academic development, only in the enabling digital environment offered by us. Once enrolled, she has also decided to be a more active participant of the evolving digital age. "I have already started training at the IT lab of my university, learning the ropes of PowerPoint presentation and Excel spreadsheets," she says.

However, at the end of the day, the onus should not be on young girls like her to make themselves digitally literate so as to improve their lives. Creating less opaque online platforms, conducive digital environments with low technical thresholds and building affordable digital infrastructure are ways to usher in sweeping connectivity. Until then digital inclusion is several clicks away.

(Endnotes)

1. OECD (2016, July 12) Are there differences in how advantaged and disadvantaged students use the Internet?, *PISA in Focus*. Retrieved November 26, 2019 from https://bit.ly/2LXklVF

2. Press Note, UN SGD, 10th Internet Governance Forum enhances the linkages between the Internet and sustainable development, https://bit.ly/34mFmiU

3. Government of India, Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation, National Statistics Office, Key Indicators of Household Social Consumption on Education in India, NSS 75th Round (JULY 2017 – JUNE 2018) https://bit.ly/2SbbdAw

YOUR WEBSITE IN A BRAND NEW AVATAR



Common Cause has refurbished its website (https://www.commoncause.in/) to reach out to its members, well-wishers and followers with a new vigour and interactivity. The new website features a complete revamp of design and a cleaner, simpler and faster interface. The content remains as rich and deep as always, but it has been repositioned and reorganised. A few key features:

- A renovated case library with an advanced search option.
- Easily accessible links to our social media pages (Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and Facebook).
- A separate section on the organisation's current focus.
- A platform for our campaigns and the journals.