Summary Report on the BEREC Workshop on Digital Divide, 8 June 2022
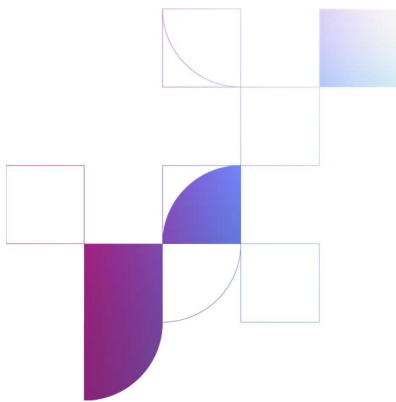
6 October 2022

Contents

1   Introduction and aim of the Workshop

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the preponderant place taken by digital technology in recent years as well as some of the major evolutions of the digital society in the past two decades.

Digital divides have grown in significance, widening pre-existing inequalities and becoming a key factor of social exclusion. Hence new digital inequalities have become more evident as well as the clear realization of the importance of reducing regional inequalities and improving social cohesion. For this reason, closing digital gaps has become one of the top political priorities in Europe.

The digital divide is not a new problem for regulators and policy makers, and it is more than ever a global and a European divide since most issues related to it are not limited to one-member state alone. Some member states have been hit harder by Covid-19 than others and some have taken effective measures to prevent digital inequalities to expand further. However, the digital divide can be identified as a problem that can benefit from a coordinated European approach.

In accordance with this, the BEREC strategy 2021-2025 recognised "the critical importance of digital technologies in society and the continued need for investments in those technologies. The large and sudden shift to teleworking and online provision of public services (including education and public administration) underlines the importance of bridging the digital divide to ensure that many of the most vulnerable citizens are included in the new digital society."

Thus, to contribute to the discussion on the Digital Divide in its various forms, BEREC hosted a Workshop with NRAs' Heads to exchange views and practices on closing the digital divide. The Workshop was a follow-up of the "Study on post Covid measures to close the digital divide" (Study), published in October 2021[1], and of the lessons learned during the Covid-19 pandemics in 2020 and 2021 regarding the digital resilience of networks and digital inclusiveness.

To put into context the following presentations, a short video with interviews to one citizen personally affected by the digital divide, one NGO representative and a municipality official started the Workshop, with the idea of getting their point of view on (i) the way digital divide affects their lives and activities, (ii) the barriers and the consequences of the digital divide, and (iii) the solutions to the digital divide.

The Workshop continued with a short presentation on the main divides identified by Iclaves in the Study and two presentations of speakers from BEUC and from the DG for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European Commission.

---

[1] Available at BEREC (europa.eu).
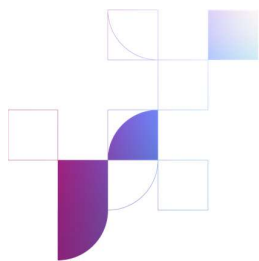
Based on the answers to an internet questionnaire circulated through NRAs in BEREC, two national experiences were selected and presented by the relevant NRA, namely CTU and AGCOM. These presentations offered different perspectives of the digital divides during the Covid-19 pandemic and contributed to animate the discussion around the key question which has guided the elaboration of the Study: "What can NRAs do in an effective way to promote digital inclusion in practice in the short and medium term?". That question opened the debate of a roundtable with the Heads of NRAs where the social aspects of the digital divide and the main digital challenges identified in the Study were further detailed based on three discussion questions:

1. How to improve broadband coverage and accelerate network rollouts in underserved areas?
2. How to secure affordability of telecom services for disadvantaged groups?
3. How to promote digital skills and motivation for digitally excluded people and ensure accessibility of digital services?

2 The presentations

2.1 Kick-off video interviews of stakeholders engaged in combatting the digital divide

The Workshop started with an introductory video of interviews of several stakeholders fighting the digital divide and its consequences in their daily or professional life. A citizen living in Netherlands that did experience situations of unwanted limited access to Internet and lack of skills insisted on the difficulty it represents in terms of administrative procedures. A local elected official of a rural city in France also insisted on the importance to secure connectivity in every territory as well as user-friendly online public services in a context of digitalization of the state. He also pointed the need to favor telecommunications infrastructures resilience, especially in rural territories, by reducing the delay of intervention of telecom players. An NGO representative from Czech Republic underlined the issue of provision of affordable digital devices for households with modest revenue.

2.2 Study on post Covid measures to close the digital divide (Beyond infrastructure deployment) – Carlota Tarin, iClaves

Mrs Carlota Tarin started her presentation referring to the three levels of digital divide mentioned in Iclaves' study. The first level is the one related to differences in access to digital technologies and the Internet. Due to this divide, there are people who have access to internet and own the means to connect and people who lack the means of connection or the enabling infrastructure. The first group benefits from internet and digital technologies while the second group is in a disadvantaged position. The main causes of the first level of digital divide are the
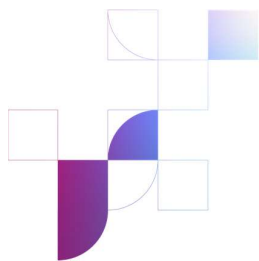
lack of internet coverage or low-quality coverage, the lack of affordability of services and devices, and the lack of accessibility of digital technologies for people with disabilities.

Once access to internet and digital technologies has become widespread, other gaps appear: a second level of the digital divide refers to differences in skills and usage patterns. Factors such as age, income and level of education affect people's acquisition of digital skills and their use of the Internet: in general, younger, higher income and highly educated people benefit more from digital technology than older, lower-income and lower educated people.

The third level of the digital divide refers to differences in the outcomes of internet and digital technologies' usage. It arises when two individuals with the same technical access conditions and the same digital skills obtain different outcomes in terms of productivity from their use of digital technologies. The most relevant factors of this gap are age, income, level of education, disabilities, and gender inequalities.

Digital divides existed prior to Covid-19, but they have grown in significance, widening pre-existing inequalities. Experts argue that the pandemic has worsened the condition of those who were already excluded rather than increased the number of the digitally excluded. One of the main reasons for this is the fact that many services (public or private) are offered first, and even only, digitally. Again, the most affected by the digital divides in the pandemic are the elderly, those with lower level of education and people in poverty.

Although connectivity seems to no longer be a big issue in Europe, with the exception of rural and isolated areas, it is necessary to encourage the closing of the other two divides.

2.3 Bridging the Digital Divide to empower Consumers – Cláudio Teixeira, BEUC

Mr. Cláudio Teixeira introduced in his presentation a calling for an answer at the European level to the issue of digital divide, focused on ensuring improved and secure connectivity for EU citizens, prioritising development of sustainable digital infrastructures and the digital empowerment of citizens. Covid-19 has exposed the hard reality of "digital poverty".

According to BEUC, it is fundamental to ensure all consumers can reap the benefits of the digital economy. Vulnerable consumers should not be left behind just because they are less tech-savvy: to this end access to basic broadband should be available at affordable prices.

The improvement of network infrastructures and rollout of 5G networks stands out as a unique opportunity to improve accessibility and better quality of service. However, over the past years, BEUC members have raised concerns on the way 5G is being deployed and marketed in their countries. According to BEUC, BEREC and national authorities must ensure operators effectively translate improved, stable, and secure connectivity into the provision of affordable, non-discriminatory, and secure internet access services to all consumers.

The digital empowering of citizens cannot be achieved only by teaching digital skills. The burden should not rest exclusively on consumers, as not everyone should have to be tech-savvy just to exercise their basic rights as a citizen. Digital tools and services must be user-friendly by design. Mechanisms to defend consumer rights online should be accessible and affordable, allowing consumers to protect themselves more easily against abusive practices, scams, or fraud attempts. Nonetheless, consumers must be protected from the negative consequences of digital transformation and digitisation of public services to their basic rights as citizens. Either to exercise their basic rights or to protect their privacy and personal data, consumers should have a right to freely choose if they wish to use (or not) online services. A 'right not to be connected' should be considered.

2.4 Reflections on the Study on post Covid measures to close the digital divide – Mr. Frank Siebern-Thomas, Head of Unit of the European Commission DG for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

Mr. Franck Siebern-Thomas started his presentation noticing that the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted both the opportunities of digital technologies, that helped businesses and public services maintain their activities throughout the pandemic, as well as the dangers of the digital divide and the damage that a push towards digitalisation, without a strong social anchor, could produce to the social fabric.

The European Commission is committed to tackling digital divides and ensure that the digital transformation of our economy and society is done in a fair way and that it supports upward convergence across and within EU Member States and regions.

Tackling the digital divide requires a comprehensive approach that includes skills but also addresses the need to strengthen digital infrastructures and enable the digital transformation of businesses and public services. To support this, the Commission proposed the European Skills Agenda, a Digital Education Plan and, in 2021, the Digital Compass for the EU's Digital Decade that revolves around four cardinal points (skills, secure and sustainable digital infrastructure, digital transformation of business, and digitalisation of public services).

The Commission provides support to businesses, who are key actors in providing connectivity and digital services and in navigating the process of digital transformations, through EU-level policy coordination, dedicated actions, and initiatives to foster digital skills and education, as well as funding. In close cooperation with worker representatives and trade unions, they further have a leading role in designing, developing, and deploying new human-centered technologies, in line with the Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles.

The findings and recommendations of the report provide interesting avenues for action, including for example the creation and use of comparison public tools of telecom services, allowing end users to make informed decisions, and the suggestion of a permanent European forum to make progress in bridging the digital divide.
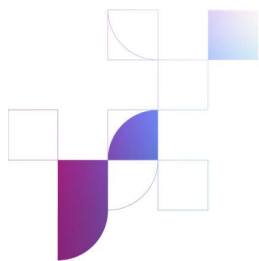
2.5 National experiences

2.5.1. Český Telekomunikační Úřad (CTU), the Telecommunication Academy project – Mrs. Hana Továrková, CTU Council Chair

Mrs. Hana Továrková presented CTU's Telecommunication Academy project which aims at building capacity and empowering consumers, especially in senior age but, more recently also in younger users. Since 2017, the project helps end-users to gain solid orientation in their rights and to understand the different choices of telecommunications and postal services. It targets notably contracts and billing of services, how to file a claim, what is the nature of calls on value added services and marketing calls, but it also presents information on cybersecurity and risks of social networks and online platforms.

The special value of this project is the methodology, which is based on physical lectures given in senior houses or public places used by senior citizens to get socialised. The lecturers themselves actively search their partners. Today, the project has a wide network of satisfied clients making it easier to reach new groups. With new topics and young target group, the Telecommunication Academy team had to learn new methods to be understandable to young students. Due to Covid-19 pandemic, physical lectures were not possible for some time, so Telecommunication Academy team joined forces with a youtuber from the Moravian metropolis of Brno who taught them how to make catchy videos and now they can feed TA's YouTube channel themselves.

2.5.2. Autorità per le Garanzie nelle Comunicazioni (AGCOM) – Dr. Paolo Lupi

Paolo Lupi started his presentation by describing the main initiatives put in place by AGCOM immediately after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, AGCOM started to collect and publish on its website information on a number of its own, governmental and private operator's initiatives aimed at: *i*) restraining from collecting debts or interrupting services to bad or late payers belonging to some social groups (disabled users, elderly users and users with social needs), *ii*) at providing users with free voice & data traffic, *iii*) supporting students involved in distance learning activities with unlimited data traffic plans and zero-rating distance learning platforms as well as giving free SIMs and devices to schools to be given to students.

Dr. Lupi also sketched the main features of "Saper(e) Consumare", a project promoted and financed by the Italian Ministry of Economic Development, with the Ministry of Education, aimed at educating and raising awareness among young people on four areas (digital education, consumer rights, sustainable consumption, and financial education) by developing content to be used by secondary school teachers to advance the skills of their students on those areas. Within that context AGCOM is playing an important role by developing content (webinars, lectures, etc.) in two key areas of it (digital education and consumer rights).
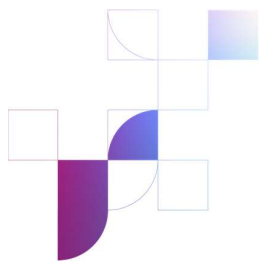
3 The Roundtable

After the presentations, that offered different perspectives of the digital divides during the Covid-19 pandemic, BEREC Heads were divided in three groups, whose members were selected to ensure a heterogeneous geographical representation, in order to address three discussion questions all revolving around the key issue which guided the elaboration of the Study: "What can NRAs do in an effective way to promote digital inclusion in practice in the short and medium term?".

The outcome of the discussion in each group was presented to the whole audience by a selected rapporteur from each group.

The first group discussed how to improve broadband coverage and accelerate network rollouts and promote quality of service in all territories, especially underserved areas. In doing so the group also discussed whether the lack of broadband coverage, specially of very high-capacity networks, is adequately addressed by the policy framework and how could NRAs play a role in increasing network rollout.

The group reviewed many national initiatives as well as the legal instruments available to Member States to accelerate network rollout, like state aid programs, broadband cost reduction directive solutions as access to passive infrastructures and co-sharing. Other instruments functional to increase coverage identified were the promotion of competition and transparency, co-investment, and network sharing. Satellite networks were also mentioned as a mean to support rural areas connectivity when other solutions are not able to address the problem. The issue of securing optimal quality of services in all territories, also in the context of copper lines switch-off plans was discussed too. Finally, even if, as understandable, most of the discussion focused on supply side solutions, it was recognised that demand side solutions have a lot of potential in this area.

The second group discussed on the way to secure affordability of telecom services for disadvantaged groups and, in doing so, whether the provisions of the European Electronic Communications Code (EECC) are adequate to tackle, from a regulatory point of view, the low affordability of telecom services for disadvantaged groups and the role of BEREC in the development of studies, best practices or guidance on how NRAs could address the lack of purchasing power of these disadvantaged groups.
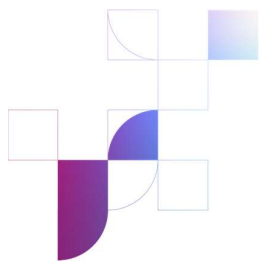
Overall, the group did not value much acting on Electronic Communication services' tariffs, and a few NRAs shared some challenging experiences with social tariffs. On the other hand, affordability is a dynamic concept and is linked to quality and speed of connection: connectivity is dependent on the amount of people and on the amount of equipment of a household, and therefore may change over time, so affordability is something that must be frequently reviewed. The group also noted that the EECC contains provisions than can be used to limit telecom tariffs with the final aim of making them affordable for everybody. Article 103, in fact, provides for the realisation (or the accreditation) of independent comparison tools which enable consumers to compare the prices – but also the quality of service – of IAS and NB-ICS and, where applicable, also NI-ICS. In this context it may prove useful to provide information
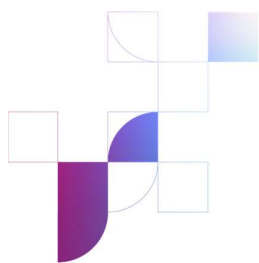
on the different providers' coverage (considering that there are relevant differences existing between urban areas and rural areas), by means of broadband mapping tools.

The third group discussed how to promote digital skills and motivation to use digital services for digitally excluded people considering the limited role played by NRAs in this context (in fact this objective is not specifically prescribed in the Code).

The group reviewed many inspiring national initiatives, from which clearly emerged that one size does not fit it all. From those initiatives was also possible to derive a couple of general principles. The first is that when putting in place upskilling processes aimed at improving people's access to the Internet in a safe and secure way it is necessary to collaborate with other (probably not the usual) subjects and institutions like NGO's, local governments, schools, but also churches. Only in this way it will be possible to reach people that otherwise would not be reached. The issue of expanding outreach is essential, therefore initiatives like giving children in school leaflets on secure use of Internet to also reach their families may prove to be particularly effective. The second principle is that institutions involved in promoting digital skills should always be aware that there are good and bad ways to digitally interact with people (by means, for instance, of web forms), therefore often it is not a problem of lack of digital skills, but that private and public institutions are making it hard for citizens to interact (fill the web forms). Therefore, the issue of correct design of digital interactions is essential. In any case consumers should always be given the "right to be offline" or the "right to opt-out".

Annex – Workshop Agenda

15.00 – 15.05	Introduction and aim of the Workshop	BEREC Chair
15.05 – 15.15	Video interviews of representatives of people that are affected by or engaged with social forms of digital divide (citizen, elected official, NGO).	
15.15-15.25	"Study on post Covid measures to close the digital divide". Short Presentation and feedback to the interviews	Mrs. Carlota Tarin Iclaves - Esade
15.25–15.40	Presentation and feedback to the interviews	Mr. Cláudio Teixeira BEUC
15.40– 15:55	Presentation and feedback to the interviews	Mr. Frank Siebern-Thomas Head of Unit – DG for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion
15.55 –16.10	Coffee break	
16:10 – 16.40	National experiences	
	- Case 1 – CTU	Mrs. Hana Továrková CTU Council Chair
	- Case 2 – AGCOM	Dr. Paolo Lupi EU WG – Co-Chair
	- Q&A and Open discussion	
16.40– 17:25	Round table - "*What can NRAs do in an effective way to promote digital inclusion in practice and in the short and medium terms?*"	
17.25– 17:30	Closing remarks	BEREC chair