

## Who will be invited to the fourth industrial revolution?



*This week, various leaders from governments and major organisations (as well as **the odd film star** or two) descended on Davos for the World Economic Forum's **annual gathering**. With the theme for this year's meeting 'Mastering the Fourth Industrial Revolution', LSE alumna **Anri van der Spuy** argues that policy challenges related to digital development(s) should focus on promoting meaningful access to, not merely the mastering of, the potentially transformative benefits of the digital revolution.*

Like previous industrial revolutions, the technological revolution that defines **the global agenda** for this week's 46<sup>th</sup> annual World Economic Forum (WEF) meeting introduces both vast potential, and vast risk. Unlike other major global transformations, this one will be characterised by a scale, scope and complexity that makes it difficult for policymakers to act – whether proactively or reactively.

### Trials of the revolution

A **recent article** by WEF's founder and executive chairperson, **Klaus Schwab**, recognises the exponential pace that characterises current technological change and its impact on humankind. The article also recognises the various uncertainties that potentially shroud the digital revolution – including growing inequality, disrupted labour markets (analysed in more detail in the recent United Nations Development Programme's **Human Development Report 2015**), the struggle on the part of businesses and economies to adapt to digital requirements, and the potential impact of artificial intelligence and the **Internet of Things**.

These challenges are also reflected in the World Bank's **recent report** on so-called 'digital dividends', which are defined as the broader development benefits that derive from the effective adoption and use of digital technologies. The World Bank argues that despite the extolled benefits of new technologies for development, the digital revolution is still plagued by traditional development challenges and is, as such, not living up to expectations. It argues that while there are individual success stories (for example, Kenya's mobile phone-based payment system, **M-PESA**), the impact of technology on 'global productivity, expansion of opportunity for the poor and the middle class, and the spread of accountable governance has so far been less than expected'.

### A is for access – but can we stop there?

With more than four billion people **reportedly** still unconnected to the Internet and **some arguing** that digital divides are actually getting bigger, a critical step towards realising the developmental benefits of the '**fourth industrial revolution**' is enabling people to actually access the Internet. This is recognised in last year's UN **Sustainable Development Goals**, with one of its goals aiming to 'significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020'.

But what is access? Facebook's **Internet.org** would argue that access to a slice of the Internet as offered by its **Free Basics initiative** – which includes Facebook's own services, but excludes a number of the services of its competitors and other sites – already helps to unlock a country's development potential. As one of Facebook's major billboards currently on display in India puts it: Free Basics is 'a first step towards digital equality'. But as the **very public backlash** in India to the Free Basics initiative (dubbed 'poor Internet for poor people') demonstrates, access to the (entire and open) Internet is not only a complex policy challenge, but is **increasingly viewed** as a **human right**.

The World Bank report proffers a similar message, arguing that the Internet and digital technologies will only fulfill some of the developmental potential they offer and will only allow benefits to be more equally distributed when other aspects of the existing digital divide are also addressed. It is more than a question of granting access: we need to safeguard users' rights online, promote user and worker skills, [connect more women](#), promote competition and innovation, and create accountable institutions (all of which are referred to in the World Bank report as 'analog complements'). More considerations to add to this list include the speed and cost of broadband access provided, the language of online content, and the device(s) used – all of which have profound effects on the nature of users' Internet experience and their ability to gain value from mere access.

## Beyond Davos

Various international organisations, governments and companies are already managing a plethora of initiatives aimed at connecting the unconnected. The [Internet Governance Forum \(IGF\)](#), for instance, recently [published](#) the outcomes of one of its multistakeholder community-driven initiatives, [Policy Options for Connecting the Next Billion](#), stressing the importance of 'intensified multistakeholder efforts' to address digital divides. The WEF, in turn, has adopted its own initiative aimed at promoting access through better public-private partnerships as part of its [Future of the Internet](#) initiative. Other initiatives aimed at improving access include the GSM Association (GSMA)'s [Network 2020](#) initiative, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU)'s [Connect 2020](#) agenda, the World Bank's [Connecting for Inclusion: Broadband access for all](#), the [Digital Impact Alliance](#), Facebook's aforementioned Internet.org and Free Basics, Google's [Project Link](#), the [Alliance for Affordable Internet's](#) work, and countless others.

In addition to a somewhat trite call for bolstering flexible regulatory environments, Schwab importantly stresses the need for integrated and comprehensive responses to the challenges posed by technological developments; particularly calling for the involvement of stakeholders from academia, public and private sectors and civil society.

While the call may be somewhat ironic given the exclusivity of an event oft [criticised](#) for its elitist nature, representatives of at least some of the aforementioned initiatives have already met at Davos this week to discuss future collaboration at a session convened by the [UN Broadband Commission](#) (read the related [discussion paper](#) and [press release](#) here). The hope is that such collaboration will shift the focus from mere statistical indicators of access to a more holistic understanding of the need to ensure that people can actually have meaningful access to benefit from the 'fourth industrial revolution'.

*This blog gives the views of the author and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

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