



While the digital divide persists, disadvantaged Australians are left footing the bill

For immediate release

The digital divide is no longer narrowing and researchers say it is even likely to grow again in the future.

Data released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in their latest Household Use of Information Technology report shows that the proportion of households with access to the internet at home remained constant since the 2014 - 2015 survey. This marks the end of years of improvement as the proportion of connected households had been increasing steadily since 2004. Currently, close to 1.3 million Australian households are still not connected to the internet.

Behind the statistics is the reality of millions of Australians that miss out on the opportunities offered by the internet. As outlined in the latest issue of Telstra's Digital Inclusion Index, "As the internet becomes the default medium for everyday exchanges, information-sharing, and access to essential services, the disadvantages of being offline grow greater. Being connected is fast becoming a necessity, rather than a luxury."

More, those non-connected Australians are hit by poverty premiums, extra fees and charges they have to pay for not being able to perform some tasks online. Fees charged on paper bills and statements are the perfect illustration of these poverty premiums.

"As the Keep Me Posted campaign is about to celebrate its second anniversary, it's deeply saddening to see that some of the statistics we used at the beginning of the campaign to build the case against paper fees remain unchanged," commented Kellie Northwood, Executive Director, Keep Me Posted. "As the digital divide persists and inequalities deepen, it is critical to ease the burden on the most vulnerable Australians and put an end to penalty fees."

Researchers J. Thomas, C. Wilson and S. Park commenting on the findings of the ABS report said in *The Conversation* "Given the increasingly central role of the internet in educational activities, the fact that the number of family households without access has not fallen since 2014-15 is concerning. (...) Instead of a digital economy designed for everyone, we appear to have created a highly stratified internet, where the distribution of resources and opportunities online reflects Australia's larger social and economic inequalities. The risk is that over time the digital divide will amplify these."

If the factors behind the digital divide are multiple and are complex to address, such as affordability, accessibility and literacy, there are ways to smooth its devastating impact. A first step to making sure that people who are digitally excluded are not unfairly penalised can be as easy as banning paper fees.

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Further information and Media enquiries: Lori Mitchell – 03 9421 2209 / lori@twosides.org.au

Keep Me Posted:

Keep Me Posted

PO Box 5231, Burnley VIC 3121

ABN: 83 161 552 192 **T:** 03 9421 2209 **W:** keepmeposted.org.au



The Keep Me Posted (KMP) campaign represents advocate groups, charities, consumer groups, employer and employee representatives, industry and political representatives who believe in the right to choose the way companies communicate with them. KMP believes every consumer should be able to choose, without penalty, how they prefer to be communicated to via banks, utility companies and other services providers. www.keepmeposted.org.au

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