

FROM A DIGITAL INDIA TO A DIGITAL BHARAT

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: E-governance - applications, models, successes, limitations, and potential incl. Aadhaar & Digital power

The term 'game changer' is sometimes used too freely in the context of conversations related to policy, especially when it comes to government policy initiatives. It is not always true, and can come across as hyperbole, and a marketing term to make the potential impact of certain initiatives seem larger than they actually are.

However, there are times when the term is appropriate, and can be seen as an accurate reflection of the capability of an initiative to change the *status quo*. The [Prime Minister's Wi-Fi Access Network Interface](#), or [PM WANI](#) announced on December 9 fits the 'game changer' tag. This provides for "Public Wi-Fi Networks by Public Data Office Aggregators (PDOAs) to provide public Wi-Fi service through Public Data Offices (PDOs) spread across [the] length and breadth of the country to accelerate proliferation of Broadband Internet services through Public Wi-Fi network in the country".

Essentially, this would mean the ability to connect to a [Wi-Fi broadband connection](#) almost anywhere. This can help to bridge the increasing digital divide in India. Recently, the NITI Aayog chief executive officer had said that India can create \$1 trillion of economic value using digital technology by 2025. However, as per the latest Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) data, about 54% of India's population has access to the Internet. The 75th round of the National Statistical Organisation survey shows that only 20% of the population has the ability to use the Internet. The India Internet 2019 report shows that rural India has half the Internet penetration as urban, and twice as many users who access the Internet less than once a week.

To illustrate this point, let us look at the Umang App (Unified Mobile Application for New-age Governance), which allows access to 2,084 services, across 194 government departments, across themes such as education, health, finance, social security, etc. The ability to access and utilise the app enhances an individual's capabilities to benefit from services that they are entitled to. With each move towards digitisation, we are threatening to leave behind a large part of our population to suffer in digital poverty.

It is clear that the focus is on last mile delivery, especially when you see how the Telecom Minister has compared it to the public call office model of past decades. This is what the government is trying to achieve with PM-WANI, where anyone living in their house, a *paan* shop owner or a tea seller can all provide public Wi-Fi hot posts, and where anyone within range can access it. This will also help to reduce the pressure on mobile Internet in India. Going back to the India Internet report, it shows that 99% of all users in India access the Internet on mobile, and about 88% are connected on the 4G network. This leads to a situation where everyone is connected to a limited network, which is getting overloaded and resulting in bad speed and quality of Internet access.

There are three important actors here. First is the Public Data Office (PDO). The PDO can be anyone, and it is clear that along with Internet infrastructure, the government also sees this as a way to generate revenue for individuals and small shopkeepers. It is important to note that PDOs will not require registration of any kind, thus easing the regulatory burden on them. Next, is the PDOA, who is basically the aggregator who will buy bandwidth from Internet service provider (ISPs) and telecom companies and sell it to PDOs, while also accounting for data used by all PDOs. Finally, you have the app provider, who will create an app through which users can access and discover the Wi-Fi access points.

Further details can be found in the [report by TRAI on a public open](#) Wi-Fi. Two pillars have been given as a baseline for public Wi-Fi.

The first is interoperability, where the user will be required to login only once and stay connected across access points. The second is multiple payment options, allowing the user to pay both online and offline. The report also talks about how products should start from low denominations, starting with 2. It is suggested in the report that the requirement of authentication through a one-time password for each instance of access may be cumbersome and automatic authentication through stored e-know your customer (KYC) is encouraged, which inevitably means a linking with Aadhaar.

The PM-WANI has the potential to change the fortunes of Bharat Net as well. Bharat Net envisions broadband connectivity in all villages in India. The project has missed multiple deadlines, and even where the infrastructure has been created, usage data is not enough to incentivise ISPs to use Bharat Net infra to provide services. One of the reasons for the lack of demand is the deficit in digital literacy in India.

The other reason is simply the lack of last mile availability of the Internet. In terms of digital literacy, it is not enough to look at digital literacy as a set of specific skills, because the skills required to navigate technology keep changing. [A more appropriate framework](#) is to see it as an evolving decentralised concept, which depends on how people interact with technology in other aspects of their life, and is influenced by local social and cultural factors. The PM-WANI seems to fit within this framework, simply because it seeks to make accessing the Internet as easy as having tea at a *chai* shop. This is not a substitute for the abysmal digital literacy efforts of the government, but will definitely help.

There are some concerns, mainly with respect to security and privacy. [A large-scale study](#) conducted at public Wi-Fi spots in 15 airports across the United States, Germany, Australia, and India discovered that two thirds of users leak private information whilst accessing the Internet. Further, the TRAI report recommends that 'community interest' data be stored locally, raising questions about data protection in a scenario where the country currently does not have a data protection law in place. These are however, problems of regulation, state capacity and awareness and do not directly affect the framework for this scheme.

With the PM-WANI, the state is expanding the reach of digital transformation to those who have been excluded till now. It is a game-changer because it has the potential to move Digital India to Digital Bharat.

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