

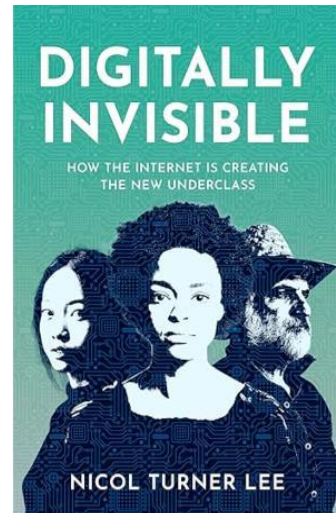
Turner Lee, N. (2023). *Digitally invisible: How the internet is creating the new underclass*. Brookings Institution Press.

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As Nicol Turner Lee illustrates in *Digitally Invisible: How the Internet Is Creating the New Underclass*, digital inequities perpetuate socioeconomic divisions, creating an underclass of digital technology that is often overlooked. In this work, Turner Lee draws on extensive research to examine the structural barriers preventing certain communities from accessing digital resources. Using data analysis, case studies, and policy critique, she demonstrates how disparities in Internet access hurt education, employment, and civic engagement. Ultimately, this work emphasizes the urgent need for inclusive technology policies and digital equity. Turner Lee advocates for a society in which connectivity is a right rather than a privilege.



In *Digitally Invisible*, **Turner Lee** examines how digital inequality has created a marginalized group of individuals lacking essential internet access and digital literacy, thereby excluding them from the benefits of a connected society. The author uses a combination of research, real-life stories, and policy analysis to illustrate the growing “digital divide” that is negatively affecting primarily low-income and minority communities. A lack of digital access results in fewer opportunities for education, employment, healthcare, and civic engagement, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and social isolation. Turner Lee discusses how digital access has become just as important as other basic needs in modern society and argues that those without it are effectively rendered invisible. To overcome systemic barriers, she advocates for equitable access to the internet, enhanced digital skills training, and affordable broadband. By examining digital access through a social justice lens, she reimagines it as a civil right, which is crucial for ensuring social mobility and equality in the digital age. The purpose of this book is to serve as a wake-up call to policymakers, educators, and other advocates regarding the

importance of addressing digital exclusion with urgency to establish a more inclusive and just digital future.

In Part 1 of the book, the author addresses the pressing social issue of digital inequality, concentrating on communities that are either disconnected from or have limited access to information and communication technology. Throughout this opening chapter, the foundation for understanding digital equity is laid out, and it is argued that internet access is not merely a technical issue but a societal concern that impacts education, employment, and civic engagement, among other things. She examines the specific factors contributing to this digital divide, emphasizing how marginalized groups, including low-income families, rural communities, and racial minorities, are disproportionately affected. Through the stories of individuals struggling with barriers to internet access, she demonstrates how this lack of connectivity leads to wider social exclusion. Further, Turner Lee delves into the systemic nature of these inequities, explaining that they stem from a combination of outdated and exclusionary policies, entrenched socioeconomic disparities, and the deliberate prioritization of digital infrastructure investments in affluent neighborhoods while neglecting underserved and rural areas. The author makes effective use of real-world examples to ground her arguments and provide readers with a clear understanding of what digital invisibility entails. She illustrates how a lack of internet access deepens inequalities and limits opportunities for upward mobility by combining statistical data with human stories. For example, she shares the story of a student who struggles to complete homework assignments due to unreliable internet access. This student's experience highlights how digital inequities can hinder educational progress and limit future opportunities as well as how a lack of connectivity exacerbates existing inequalities and restricts upward mobility.

In Part Two, Turner Lee examines the persistent digital divide in rural America. This section aims to highlight the barriers rural communities face due to a lack of access to the Internet and inadequate infrastructure. As a result of these connectivity disparities, the author examines how rural residents are at a disadvantage in an increasingly digital world, resulting in economic and educational inequities. By advocating for targeted investments to create lasting change, she examines the role of policymakers and private sector stakeholders in closing this gap. Lee's analysis is based on comprehensive research and illustrated through compelling case studies that humanize the experiences of rural populations affected by digital exclusion. She shares the story of a small business owner in Garrett County, Maryland, who struggles to maintain an online presence due to unreliable internet access. This case study highlights how digital exclusion impacts economic opportunities in rural areas. By combining this personal story with broader statistical data on rural broadband access, Turner Lee effectively humanizes the issue and demonstrates the real-world consequences of digital inequities.

Due to issues highlighted in *Digitally Invisible*, it is important to note recent efforts made by the Biden-Harris administration to address digital inequities. In December 2024, the administration approved more than \$60.6 million for Digital Equity Capacity Grant applications and recommended more than \$250 million for digital skills and inclusion projects. The initiatives are part of the “Internet for All” campaign, which aims to close the digital divide and provide affordable, high-speed

Internet access to all Americans. Turner Lee's work is timely and important, as it aligns with these policy efforts to make connectivity a right rather than a privilege.

Several stories are presented by the author in which students are unable to complete school assignments, workers are unable to take advantage of job opportunities, and residents are unable to access telehealth services because of inadequate opportunities to access digital affordances of various sorts. Rural livelihoods, health, and economic mobility are impacted by inadequate digital infrastructure. This chapter focuses on the contrast between urban and rural digital experiences, which Turner Lee attributes to the lack of high-speed broadband in rural areas. As part of her examination, she discusses federal programs aimed at expanding rural broadband access, evaluates their effectiveness, and suggests improvements. To bridge this gap, she recommends increasing federal funding, fostering public-private partnerships, and implementing local community initiatives.

As a writer, Turner Lee's style is accessible and authoritative, making it appealing to a broad audience, ranging from policymakers to concerned citizens. Despite this, some readers may find the policy recommendations to be overly optimistic given the complex challenges that rural digital infrastructure faces. Even so, the author's call to action is persuasive and grounded in practical solutions, making Part Two an essential read for anyone interested in bridging the digital divide in rural communities.

In Part Three, Turner Lee discusses the ongoing challenges that urban communities face as a result of the lack of equitable access to the Internet. The "Continued Urban Neglect" section identifies how urban neglect contributes to the digital divide, leaving marginalized communities with limited online opportunities and reinforcing existing socioeconomic barriers. The author argues that inadequate infrastructure, coupled with socio-economic policies, perpetuates the digital exclusion of urban residents, particularly people of color and low-income families.

According to Turner Lee's analysis, digital neglect has a multifaceted impact on urban residents, from limited access to online education and employment opportunities to restricted participation in digital government services. The author presents a compelling case for how digital disparities can exacerbate poverty and impede community development through the use of data and case studies. Turner Lee, by examining policy shortcomings and proposing inclusive approaches, calls for a national commitment to digital equity as a means of empowering urban communities. An important aspect of this chapter is that it sheds light on the urgent need for proactive action to bridge the digital divide.

Part Four, "Schools in Crises," addresses educational disparities exacerbated by the digital divide, particularly in underserved schools. Throughout the book, Turner Lee explains how internet access and digital resources increasingly marginalize students in low-income communities, and in this section, she contextualizes these inequalities within the context of broader educational crises. The author emphasizes the disproportionate impact of digital inequity on students of color and those living in rural areas, demonstrating how digital inequity hinders the advancement of education and social mobility for these students. As she argues, the Internet has become a necessity as opposed to a luxury for education. She argues that students

without reliable access to digital tools face heightened barriers to academic success and long-term career prospects. Her detailed analysis of “schools in crisis” emphasizes the structural challenges within educational institutions that contribute to the cycle of inequality and the urgent need for policy interventions and collaborative solutions to bridge the digital gap.

In the concluding section of the book, the author outlines a critical framework for moving toward a more inclusive and just digital society. Following from the themes discussed in earlier chapters, Turner Lee emphasizes the need for inclusive digital policies that address systemic inequalities perpetuated by the Internet. Highlighting numerous barriers marginalized communities face when it comes to gaining access to digital resources and opportunities, she argues that the digital divide is exacerbated by socioeconomic status, race, and geography. By using compelling data and poignant anecdotes, Turner Lee illustrates how a lack of digital access prevents individuals from participating fully in society, from education to employment. This section is notable for Turner Lee's advocacy of a holistic approach to digital equity. To establish an equitable digital infrastructure, she urges collaboration among stakeholders, including policymakers, the private sector, and community groups. She suggests several actionable steps to protect consumers' rights, including expanding broadband access and improving digital literacy programs. Additionally, she emphasizes the need for policy discussions to include the voices of those most affected by digital exclusion. She argues that by elevating marginalized perspectives, we can develop solutions that are not only effective but also culturally relevant and empowering. An emphasis on community involvement aligns with the principles of participatory design, which advocates for a digital society that is shaped by the people who inhabit it.

As a call to action for policymakers, educators, and technologists, *Digitally Invisible* is thorough, engaging, and thought-provoking. Readers are introduced to the concept of digital invisibility and encouraged to think critically about the societal implications of the digital divide as well as how digital exclusion perpetuates inequality in society. According to Turner Lee, digital inequality is more than a technological problem. A “digital divide” impacts opportunities, social mobility, and civic engagement, leading to a modern underclass with diminished prospects. By combining anecdotes and data-driven analysis, Turner Lee convincingly argues that digital exclusion has far-reaching consequences. Unlike other works that rely solely on technical analysis, Turner Lee's work humanizes the issue through stories taken from affected communities. The theme of “invisibility” is prominent, illustrating how individuals and communities are left behind by a digitally connected world. By bridging academic analysis with social critique, Turner Lee offers a roadmap for addressing the digital divide with empathy and action.

## Reference

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### About the Reviewer

**Mariam Alothman** is a dedicated education professional with more than 12 years of experience in teaching, instructional development, and educational leadership. She earned her master's degree at the School of Education at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) and is currently pursuing a PhD at The Graduate School of Education & Human Development at The George Washington University. Her career began in Kuwait, where she served as a primary school teacher at Mariam Boudai Primary School from 2010 to 2022.



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