Thought-leadership Piece

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The Next Digital Divide Is Already Here — And It's About AI

By Sundar Pichai

For the past three decades, societies around the world have worked to close what we once called the digital divide—the gap between those who had access to the internet and those who did not. Thanks to global connectivity and more affordable devices, billions more people today can access information than ever before.

But a new divide is quietly emerging.

Artificial intelligence is rapidly becoming part of everyday life—from how students research assignments to how professionals analyze information, write reports, and generate ideas. In many ways, AI is becoming a new layer of infrastructure for knowledge itself.

And that raises an important question: **Who gets to use it—and how responsibly is it built?**

The challenge ahead is what many researchers describe as the **third digital divide**—the gap between people who can use AI to amplify their thinking and those who cannot.

Early signals suggest this gap may grow quickly. In a recent survey of enterprise customers using Gemini for Google Workspace, people reported saving an average **of 105 minutes per user per week**, and **75 percent said it improves the quality of their work.** Yet awareness and adoption of generative AI still track closely with existing advantages in education and income, with early usage concentrated in more educated, higher-income communities. Without intentional action, these patterns risk widening the very opportunity gaps technology should help close.

But access is only part of the responsibility.

As AI becomes more powerful, it also becomes more resource-intensive. Training and operating advanced AI systems requires significant computing power and energy. If we are not thoughtful, we risk solving one divide while creating another—expanding access to intelligence while increasing environmental cost.

At Alphabet, we believe progress should not come at that kind of tradeoff. Building AI responsibly means expanding access while reducing impact. It means investing not only in more capable models, but in more efficient infrastructure. And it means committing to long-term goals, including operating on carbon-free energy 24/7 by 2030.

Responsibility, in this sense, is not a constraint on innovation. It is what makes innovation sustainable.

At the same time, access remains essential.

Libraries have long been one of society's most powerful equalizers. For generations, they have provided free access to knowledge, technology, and learning spaces for people from every background.

As AI becomes a core tool for research, creativity, and discovery, these institutions can once again play a critical role—ensuring that access to the next generation of technology is not limited to those who already have advantages.

Through initiatives like **free Gemini AI Labs in Los Angeles public libraries**, we're exploring how communities can experience AI in an open and supportive environment. These spaces allow students, parents, and lifelong learners to experiment with new tools, ask questions, and build confidence using AI for research, creativity, and problem-solving.

What makes efforts like these powerful is not just the technology itself. It's the environment around it—teachers, librarians, and communities working together to support learning.

Innovation often moves quickly. Trust moves more slowly.

To build technology that truly benefits society, we have to move forward with both in mind: **expanding access and reducing impact—bold innovation and responsible stewardship.**

AI has the potential to help solve some of the hardest challenges in the world—from scientific discovery to education to climate solutions. But those benefits will only be realized if the tools themselves are broadly accessible, widely understood, and sustainably built.

The future of AI shouldn't be defined by who has the most powerful technology.

It should be defined by how many people we empower to use it—and how responsibly we choose to build it.

If we get this right, AI will not widen the gap between opportunity and inequality.

It will help close it.

Strategy Note (Earned Media Rationale)

This thought-leadership piece positions Alphabet at the intersection of two critical ESG priorities: AI digital equity (Social) and sustainable AI development (Environmental). Rather than presenting AI as a product, the article frames it as public infrastructure—requiring both broad access and responsible stewardship. The "third digital divide" provides a compelling entry point, while the sustainability discussion expands the narrative to include the environmental cost of scaling AI. Referencing initiatives such as Gemini AI Labs in Los Angeles Public Library grounds the argument in a tangible, community-based solution without becoming promotional. The tone reflects Sundar Pichai's measured, user-centric leadership style—balancing optimism with responsibility—thereby strengthening credibility and aligning with Alphabet's long-term positioning as a leader in responsible AI.

AI Citations

1. “Analyze the communication tone and rhetorical style of Alphabet CEO Sundar Pichai based on his LinkedIn posts, public interviews, keynote speeches, and articles in mainstream media. Then refine and polish a thought-leadership opinion piece written on his behalf so that the language, tone, pacing, and framing align with his typical communication style.” prompt, ChatGPT, GPT-5.3 version, OpenAI, 5 Mar. 2026, https://chat.openai.com/chat.
2. “Research evidence and credible statistics related to the emerging ‘third digital divide,’ including disparities in access, awareness, and effective use of generative AI tools across education and income levels. Identify data from Alphabet research or surveys related to Gemini productivity improvements and analyze how unequal AI adoption may widen opportunity gaps.” prompt, ChatGPT, GPT-5.3 version, OpenAI, 5 Mar. 2026, https://chat.openai.com/chat.
3. “Research Alphabet’s sustainability initiatives related to artificial intelligence infrastructure, including energy consumption, data center efficiency, and the company’s commitment to operating on carbon-free energy 24/7 by 2030. Analyze how these efforts reflect responsible AI development and can be incorporated into a thought-leadership narrative.” prompt, ChatGPT, GPT-5.3 version, OpenAI, 5 Mar. 2026, https://chat.openai.com/chat.