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Access to ICT key in bridging digital divide

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THE term digital divide evokes strong emotions. The Rev Jesse Jackson calls it "a classic form of apartheid". Some call it "technological segregation" and to US President Clinton, it's the chasm between the information haves and have-nots.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir sees it as the information and knowledge gap between the economic haves and have-nots.

During the opening speech of the Second World Knowledge Conference, he said, "This digital divide is even greater than the income and economic gaps between the backward and the developed world. The poorest societies on earth are even more starved of knowledge than they are for food. Those who need it most have the least. Herein lies the present tragedy and the making of a future catastrophe."

There are a certain percentage of people or countries that have the best information technology at their disposal. The difference between these groups of people or countries is the digital divide.

Should we really care about it? What is Malaysia's status and, more importantly, what is the status of the digital divide within Malaysia itself?

To get the correct perspective, let's take the Internet connection facility. Of the world total of 171.25 million Internet connections Europe and North America monopolise over 80 per cent. The Asia Pacific region has only 16 per cent and of this, Malaysia has not more than 0.5 per cent.

How do we bridge the divide? While the Government may not be able to single-handedly close the gap, a prudent and viable ICT (information communication technology) policy will go a long way. Access to the ICT is the key factor.

The Multimedia Super Corridor illustrates the Government's commitment to the digital age. When talking about the MSC, one cannot help but compare it with Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan. But without the MSC, Malaysia's digital divide statistics would be much worse. We would be in the backwaters of the information age.

As the Prime Minister says, "Without the MSC, Malaysia might have learnt a little about the new technologies but we would not have been that focused."

Malaysians should feel excited and proud about the MSC and what it has to offer in this age of technology. Incentives and programmes such as the EPF computer withdrawal scheme have yet to make much of an impact on the rate of Internet penetration in our society.

During the Brunei Apec CEO Summit meeting, Multimedia Development Corporation chairman Tan Sri Othman Yeop Abdullah said that the MSC was set up in recognition of the fact that Malaysia was losing its competitive advantage in its traditional economic sectors and that there was a need to increase productivity through technology and high value-added economic activities.

Take Bill Gates, for example. He was parsimonious until his troubles with anti-trust laws. He now heads the largest philanthropic foundation in North America. The Gates Millennium scholarships programme provides scholarships in education, engineering, math and science to poor students. The same scenario will play out with the MSC sooner or later.