



the global digital divide

The global “digital divide” is starting to narrow, but digital equality remains an elusive goal. Wealthy nations with the resources to develop information and communication technologies are heavily wired, while developing nations are lagging far, far behind. North Americans and Europeans account for fully half of all world Internet use, although they make up only 17 percent of the world’s population. By contrast, Asians and Africans account for just 37 percent of Internet users, despite the fact that they make up 70 percent of the global population. But this gap is slowly narrowing. Since 2000, the number of Internet users has more than quadrupled in the world’s most populous nations, including India and China. And Internet use in Africa has soared by more than 700 percent during this same period. Yet many experts say that simply bringing computer access to the people isn’t enough to bridge the digital divide. Rather, the words and images presented on the screen must be conveyed in a language that can be understood and in a tone that is culturally appropriate.

Who is using the Internet today, and how does usage vary across the globe? Defining who exactly is an “Internet user” is tricky. The U.S Department of Commerce counts persons ages 3 and older who “currently use” the Internet, while the International Telecommunications Union tallies persons ages 2 and older who have gone online in the past 30 days. The Internet World Statistics (IWS) defines a user as a person who has access to an Internet connection and the basic knowledge required to use web technology. This definition is based on the assumption that a single Internet connection may be shared by many users, particularly in developing nations. As a result, Internet users in some regions could outnumber Internet subscribers or the number of available telephone lines.

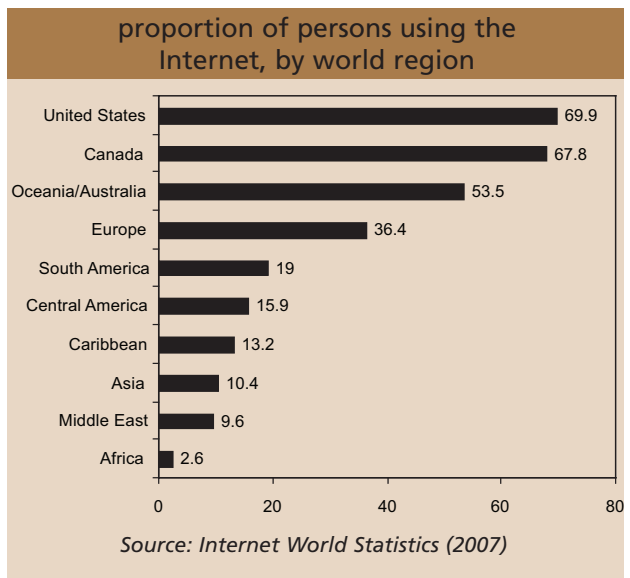
The accompanying figure shows the Internet penetration rate, or the percentage of the total population in a given region that uses the Internet, according to the IWS criteria. An estimated 16 percent of the world now uses the Internet, but regional differences are stark: Just 2.6 percent of the population in Africa now uses the Internet, compared to 10 percent in Asia and the Middle East, 13 to 19 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean, 36 percent in Europe, and nearly 70 percent in North America. The most “wired” country in the world is Iceland, where more than 86 percent of the population regularly logs on.

Penetration also varies within regions. In Asia, two-thirds of all people in Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea use the Internet, yet less than 1 percent of those in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Nepal do so. Internet use in the

Middle East ranges from less than 1 percent in Iraq, to 10 percent in Iran and Saudi Arabia, to 51 percent in Israel.

Developing nations have the lowest rates of usage, but also the most rapid rates of growth. Yet connectivity is only the first step. People need to be able to read and make sense of the sites they visit. Much of the Web is built by private ventures, mostly in Western and developed nations. Roughly one-third of all web sites are in English, although English speakers account for just 17 percent of the world’s population. Moreover, illiterate persons will benefit little from text-intensive web sites. In response, some scientists in South Africa and elsewhere are developing speech recognition, text-to-speech, and other voice technologies. Microsoft has started local language programs to help universities and governments adapt their software to an ever-expanding list of dialects.

Technophiles say that web access will foster the efficient and free exchange of information, ideas, and culture on a global scale. But the expansion of the Internet is accompanied by a dark side: censorship. The majority of the world’s nations have policies that stifle—if not punish—freedom of speech online. For example, while China’s Communist government encourages Internet use for business and education, it has tried to block access to web sites deemed subversive or obscene. Dozens of bloggers have been imprisoned for “inciting subversion.” Experts are optimistic, however, that the promises of the Internet will ultimately be met in the world’s developing nations.



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