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Report finds growing inequality across global information society

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A decade into the information society, key computing and communication technologies are even more concentrated in a few countries, not less, according to a University of Washington report to be released today.

The information society is not as pervasive as might be expected, according to the researchers behind the World Information Access 2006 Report. Between 1995 and 2005, mobile phones and Internet access became more evenly distributed around the world. But today, the supply of computers, Internet hosts and secure servers is even more concentrated among select core countries. Internet access remains limited and costly in many developing countries.

"Despite the fact that more computers are being produced every day, these computers are actually more concentrated in rich countries today than back in 1995," said one of the authors, Phil Howard, UW assistant professor of communication. The study, conducted by Howard's team, documents the changing map of the information society over the last decade by looking at data on computers, Web hosts, and other telecommunications equipment.

"The five billion people who are now offline will probably join the information society through their mobile phones, not their computers," he added.

In the world's largest cities, going online means paying to tap into Western culture. The average person spending an hour online at a commercial Internet access point - such as a cybercaf?- would spend more than 10 percent of his or her average daily income. People from wealthy countries spend relatively less on Internet access and get plenty of relevant content, while people from poor countries pay more for an hour of Internet access but are less likely to find news and other cultural content generated within their country.

"So people in London or New York spend a small portion of their daily income on Internet access and find a significant amount of content in English and of cultural interest," according to Howard. "But when people in Cairo or Jakarta spend a large portion of their daily income on Internet access, they find relatively fewer Egyptian and Indonesian websites."

When the team surveyed the national libraries of 165 countries, they found that two-thirds either had English websites or offered English translations of their websites. Experts estimate that at most 20 percent of the world speaks English.

Despite this inequality in technology access, civil society in some countries has really taken to the Internet. Nearly 10,000 civic groups in 152 countries are asserting a digital presence today, using the internet to organize, promote their work, and offer social services.

In Latin America and Asia, people are putting more cultural content online than they are pouring into books, with new websites going up at five times the publication rate of new books.

Additional findings, along with the World Information Access Project's 2006 Briefing Booklet, are available online at www.wiareport.org.

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