

Social inequality and the World Wide Web

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Those who are "on line" know that the Internet is a tool with astonishing potential. With the click of a mouse, anyone anywhere in the globe can access a vast amount of knowledge. For the cost of a local telephone call, a user can interact, converse, exchange ideas and information with people thousands of kilometres away instantaneously.

The recently published United Nations Human Development Report (UNHDR), detailing the growing worldwide gulf between rich and poor, points out that the Internet has "broken the bounds of cost, time and distance" in global communications, opening tremendous possibilities for improving the lives of hundreds of millions of people.

Since emerging onto the public arena in the early 1990s, the web has become the fastest growing means of mass communication in history. The number of Internet hosts—computers with a direct connection to the web—has risen from less than 100,000 in 1988 to 36 million in 1998. There were an estimated 143 million users by mid-1998, or 2 percent of the world's population. This is expected to grow to 700 million by 2001. Falling computer prices have fueled this increase, with more than 50 million US households and almost 50 million European households, now having at least one personal computer.

But with the Internet, as in every sphere of human activity, the capitalist market introduces great social inequalities. The distribution of users is polarised, in part due to low incomes in developing countries, and in part because of the inadequate telecommunications infrastructure in many parts of the world. North America, with 5 percent of world population, is home to 50 percent of Internet users and has more computers than the rest of the world combined. South Asia, by contrast, has 20 percent of world population but only 1 percent of the world's Internet users.

While most OECD countries have between 50 and 70

telephone mainlines per 100 people, a quarter of the world have still to reach levels of one per hundred. These people are predominantly in sub-Saharan Africa and the least developed countries. In South Africa, the most connected of the African countries, many hospitals and about 75 percent of schools have no telephone line. At the universities, where Internet connection exists, one terminal must service up to one thousand people.

The divide between industrialised and developing countries is reflected within the developing countries themselves, where most telephone lines are concentrated in the urban centres and the rural population has little access. Widespread illiteracy in many developing countries also acts to limit web usage.

Income and cost are a major factor in limiting Internet access. For the average Bangladeshi, the purchase price of a computer is equivalent to eight years' wages as compared to one month's wages for a purchaser in the United States or Australia. The average South African user has an income seven times the national average, and 90 percent of users in Latin America are in the upper-income groups. Average monthly costs for Internet connection and usage in many African countries can run to \$100, compared to \$10 a month in the US.

The UNHDR suggests the typical Internet user is young, educated, more likely to be on an above average income than not, living in a city in an OECD country and English-speaking (80 percent of websites are in English, a language spoken by 10 percent of the world's population). Only 12 percent of users globally, more than 17 million people, do not live in OECD countries.

Yet the expansion of Internet is a contradictory phenomenon. It is associated with the development and spread of modern telecommunications essential to the global organisation of productive processes carried out over the last two decades by the major transnational

corporations. As the UNHDR report establishes, the changes in world economy have led to a deepening social polarisation that can be measured by many indices, including access to the Internet. At the same time, the very fact that governments are compelled to upgrade their telecommunication systems and provide for Internet access in order to attract investment has opened up opportunities, albeit still limited, for its wider use.

The UN report cites the example of the Nairobi University Medical School Library, which can afford just 20 medical journals as compared to the average US medical library which subscribes to around 5,000. Developing countries suffer the ravages of the worst viruses and infectious diseases, yet their medical personnel and students have the least access to information on these diseases. The Internet can link these medical personnel and students to universities, hospitals and research centres anywhere in the world for minimal cost.

One information service established is HealthNet, a network linking health care workers in 30 countries, including 22 in Africa. It uses radio and telephone based computer networks and a low-earth-orbit satellite so it accessible to areas with no telecommunications infrastructure. Through this service, doctors in central Africa were able to exchange information during the outbreak of the Ebola virus in 1995. Malaria researchers in Ghana use it to communicate with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. The network facilitates the reporting, discussion, earlier warnings and requests for assistance for outbreaks of infectious diseases.

In rural Bolivia, farmers who may never have seen a computer still have access to the Internet. Questions concerning crops are given to a community leader, relayed to a radio station and then sent to the UN Development Program's communication centre. The question is posted on the web and answers received are emailed back to the radio station and broadcast.

Many political groups have turned to the Internet to publicise their cause or plight, to expose injustices and violations of human rights, and to organise opposition to governments and corporations. Indonesian students have used the web to organise and coordinate demonstrations against the Suharto and Habibie governments. In Malaysia, supporters of Anwar

Ibrahim publicised his frame-up trial and organised opposition to the Mahathir regime via the Internet. Most recently, opponents of the US-NATO war on Yugoslavia have used the World Wide Web to present information to an international audience, cracking the monopoly on information transmission held by the capitalist media conglomerations.



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