Chapter 14
Beyond the Digital Divide:
Language Factors, Resource Wealth, and Post-Communism in Mongolia

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the interplay between society and Internet technology in the context of the developing former socialist country of Mongolia. This chapter goes beyond questions of access to the Internet and explores three factors of the global digital divide. First, this chapter explores how language factors such as non-Roman domain names and the use of the Cyrillic alphabet exacerbate the digital divide in the impoverished country of Mongolia. ICANN's initiation of international domain names is an initial development toward achieving linguistic diversity on the Internet. Second, this chapter explores how post-communist settings and foreign investment and aid dependency afflict Internet development. A rapid economic growth in Mongolia has increased access to mobile phones, computers, and the Internet; however, the influx of foreign capital poured into the mining, construction, and telecommunication sectors frequently comes in non-concessional terms raising concerns over the public debt in Mongolia.

INTRODUCTION

The discrepancy in Internet use between developed and developing countries is referred as the "global digital divide." In recent years, developing countries have exponentially increased their use of information and communication technology, especially mobile phones, and this increase has contributed to the rhetoric of the closing of the global digital divide. The World Bank (2012) reports that the number of mobile phone subscribers in developing countries rose by 1500 percent from 2000 to 2010, from 4 persons per 100 to 72 in 2010 (p. 11). In some developing countries, more people have access to a mobile phone than to a bank or clean water (World Bank, 2012, p. 3). Yet, only 12.7% of the population in Sub-Saharan Africa and 9.4% of the population in South-Asia used the Internet in 2011, whereas in Europe 73.4% of population used the Internet (World Bank, 2013). Though the Internet is increasingly accessed on mobile phones, the rhetoric surrounding the closing the global digital divide based on increasing mobile phone use in developing

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countries does more harm than good because this rhetoric reinforces the access-centered approach that oftentimes translates into policies that benefit multinational corporations (MNC) helping them tap into markets in developing countries. The access-centered and western-focused digital divide research has not deeply explored the language, political and cultural factors of the global digital divide.

Unlike mobile phones, Internet development directly reflects social and cultural settings and existing inequalities. In this chapter, I strive to explain the interplay between society and Internet technology in the context of the developing former socialist country of Mongolia. This chapter goes beyond questions of access to the Internet and explores three factors of the global digital divide. First, this chapter explores how language factors such as non-Roman domain names and the use of the Cyrillic alphabet exacerbate the digital divide in the impoverished country of Mongolia. Second, this paper explores how post-communist settings and foreign investment and aid dependency afflict Internet development.

THE CASE STUDY OF THE GLOBAL DIGITAL DIVIDE: THE INTERNET IN MONGOLIA

The Mongolian case demonstrates challenges typical to developing countries with unexploited natural resources and also has similarities to other former socialist countries with a communist past. A mining boom in the last decade, which lured foreign investment into Mongolia, brought a GDP growth of 17% in 2011 ("Before the gold rush," 2013, Feb 16). With a nomadic culture, a Buddhist tradition, and a communist past, Mongolia has a unique struggle with the digital divide. Mongolia is a Central Asian developing country landlocked between Russia and China with a small population of 2.7 million. Like many other developing countries, Mongolia has an emerging economy indicated by the GNI per capita of US$ 2,310. Internet use has grown steadily, yet only 16.4 individuals per 100 persons use the Internet in 2012 (ITU, 2013a).

Though access to the Internet has steadily been increasing as shown in Figure 1, for many

Figure 1. The growth in the percentages of Internet users, fixed phone users and mobile phone users in Mongolia