Chapter 11
Global Digital Divide:
Language Gap and Post-Communism in Mongolia

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores several factors of the global digital divide in the former socialist country of Mongolia. By analyzing manifest media content on the Internet, as well as by interviewing people involved in Internet development, this chapter goes beyond the question of access to the Internet and asks how language factors exacerbate the digital divide in an impoverished country. Initiating non-Western alphabet domain names and setting culturally inclusive non-Western alphabet standards have been important steps in achieving linguistic diversity on the Internet and overcoming the global digital divide in countries like Mongolia. Furthermore, this chapter explores how a post-communist political setting, aid dependency, and international organizations influence Internet development. The analysis of in-depth interviews provides nuanced explanation of the socialist legacy that is traced in institutional routines, people's attitudes, and social practices.

INTRODUCTION

The discrepancy in Internet use between developed and developing countries is referred as the "global digital divide." In recent years, there have been studies showing that the use of information and communication technology has grown at an impressive rate in developing countries, thus narrowing the global digital divide. The International Telecommunications Union (ITU, 2006), an organization of the United Nations, reported that the difference in the ratio between the Internet users per 100 persons in developed and developing countries has been reduced from 73:1 in 1994 to 4:1 in 2004 (James, 2008). Yet, less than 5% of Africans and 15% of Asians used the Internet in 2007, whereas in Europe and the Americas 43% and 44% of population used the Internet respectively (Tryhorn, March 2009). One half of the 1.6 billion Internet users worldwide speak non-English languages (Sang-Hun, Oct 2009) and Asia alone has twice the number of Internet users

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that the North America has. The access-centered and Western-focused digital divide research has not explored the language factors of the global digital divide.

An increase in mobile phone use in developing countries in recent years has also contributed to the closing of the global digital divide. The ITU reported that by the end of 2008, there were 4.1 billion mobile users (six out of 10 people), two-third of whom are users in developing countries. 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 countries does more harm than good. 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.

Unlike mobile phones, Internet development directly reflects social and cultural settings and existing inequalities. In this paper, I strive to explain the interplay between society and Internet technology in the context of the developing former socialist country of Mongolia. By analyzing the web sites of government and non-government organizations, as well as by interviewing people involved in Internet media development, this paper 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-Latin domain names and the Cyrillic alphabet use exacerbate the digital divide in the impoverished country of Mongolia. Second, this paper explores how post-communist settings impede Internet development. And last, this paper shows how aid dependency and international organizations influence Internet development in Mongolia.[1]

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

With a nomadic culture, a Buddhist tradition and a communist past, Mongolia has a unique struggle with the digital divide. At the same time, the Mongolian case demonstrates common challenges typical to other developing and former socialist countries. 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 underdeveloped economy and weak infrastructure indicated by the GDP per capita of US$1,991 and 12.5% Internet access per 100 persons in 2008 (UN, 2008).

Though access to the Internet has steadily been increasing since the first Internet node MagicNet was established in 1996 as shown in Figure 1, for many Mongolians the Internet is still a distant priority. The Mongolian case clearly shows the challenges of the global digital have-nots. The vastness of the territory, the underdeveloped infrastructure especially in the provinces of Mongolia, and the high price of international connections have hindered the access to the Internet for many Mongolians.

The Mongolian case also shows the challenges associated with achieving language diversity on the Internet. The Mongolian language content on the Internet is worth studying to understand the exacerbating factors of the global digital divide in small developing countries. By examining how Internet domain names are managed and the Cyrillic alphabet is used in Mongolia, this paper explores linguistic factors contributing to the global digital divide. Despite the relatively high literacy rate of 96% common to former socialist countries, Internet use is still low partly due to the use of the Cyrillic alphabet and the low degree of English knowledge among Mongolians. From the beginning of the thirteenth century until 1941, Mongolians used the *uighur*