INFORMATION

Did You Know that in all of Africa there are only 14 million telephone lines, fewer than in New York City or Tokyo?


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The Digital City

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are revolutionizing the economic, political and cultural spheres of cities. From online procurement and payment, to electronic voting on local referenda, the Internet Age has arrived in local governance - that is, if you live in a city in North America, Europe or parts of Asia. In many other parts of the world, however, the telecommunication revolution has yet to take place. In Africa, for instance, only 14 million telephone lines exist, fewer than the number of telephones in New York or Tokyo. The distribution of television sets shows similar inequalities. Although there is one television set for every four persons worldwide, in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa the number of persons per television is 14.5 and 20, respectively.

The 'digital divide,' the term used to indicate the gap between the ICT haves and have-nots, concerns mainly issues of access and affordability. To put it another way: 'the typical Internet user worldwide' is male, under 35 years old, has a college education and a high income, is English-speaking, and lives in a city. ICT developments represent a truly global technological revolution, and user-statistics are changing rapidly.

However, even in the United States of America, where Internet use thrives, the digital-divide is a reality. Poor urban neighbourhoods, and the minority groups living in them, are as unlikely to have Internet access as the poor elsewhere in the world. The potential of the technology to improve the quality of life worldwide clearly depends on how the technology is used, and who can use it. Without doubt, one of the main reasons for limited use of the Internet in developing countries have been pricing practices - usually driven by telecommunication monopolies. Among 35 African countries canvassed in August 2000, for example, the average cost of accessing 50 pages per day from the Internet was US$53/month.

E-Services and E-Commerce

Cities such as Wellington, New Zealand, London, U.K., and Hong Kong, P.R.C., are creating Internet portals, a standard interface allowing citizens to access, and in some cases provide for a variety of services, using simple questions such as "How can I..?" In San Antonio, Texas, USA, local government is contracting the private sector to conduct 'reverse tenders', whereby 'buyers' from around the world competitively bid to supply goods and services. It is said to save the city an estimated 25-30 percent on purchases, while improving administrative transparency. Elsewhere, the city of Dhar, Madhya Pradesh, India, has set up an intranet that enables rural citizens to obtain information on the price of commodities in Dhar, helping them to decide whether to travel into the city to buy or sell goods.

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In digital cities (locations with high levels of Internet access), ICT is rapidly revolutionizing how local government does business. A combination of three factors is driving the process: (a) the potential of new technologies to improve the efficiency of local service delivery; (b) citizens' demands for improved customer care; and (c) the need to improve local revenue generation.

The information age is also changing the role of cities in the global knowledge-based economy, as they increasingly see themselves as competitors in a global marketplace and seek to capitalize on their assets. These assets are no longer principally based on material capital, but increasingly on human capital, particularly the ability to develop new services, software and technology. To respond to such new demands, many digital cities are promoting learning, such as in Tampere, Finland, where the city has set up partnerships with research institutions and the private sector to ensure better coordination between local employ-

ers and the education system. Similar experiments to integrate new media into urban planning are underway in many other digital cities. In Los Angeles, U.S.A., the Blue Line TeleVillage has been developed to integrate land-use, transport and ICT infrastructure planning to enhance the quality of life of residents outside the city centre. In New York, USA, Dublin, Ireland, and Manchester, U.K., 'information districts' have been created to exploit the potential synergies between global connectivity and face-to-face meetings in high-density urban settings. These initiatives provide potential for urban regeneration.

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ICT-supported e-democracy may re-invent local governance, and create new opportunities for collaboration between the city and its citizens. The concept of e-democracy spans a continuum from the passive offering of information on upcoming events and activities in the city council, to interactive participation in real-time discussion and electronic town-hall meetings. At the heart of the concept of e-democracy is the desire to broaden and deepen civic engagement in the planning and management of cities.

Proponents seeking to bring direct democracy down to the city level, often point to the results of the 2000 U.S. Democratic Presidential Primary in Arizona. Here, it is suggested, that as a direct result of Internet voting, turnout increased by over 600 percent, with major improvements in the participation of African-American, Hispanic and Native American communities, making it the most inclusive and accessible election in the State's history. But where there is limited access to ICT, improving the quality of local information through more accessible forms of participatory monitoring and evaluation, is preferred.

To support both electronic and more traditional processes, UNCHS (Habitat) has helped establish local urban observatories in over 60 cities around the world. These observatories bring together representatives from local government, civil society, researchers and the media to develop, collect and analyze urban indicators and improve the effectiveness of local initiatives and policies. Another innovative method has been developed in Bangalore, India, whereby citizens and the local media assess urban service provision through 'city report cards', with the results fed into an action plan to develop future initiatives. With the advent of ICT, political mobilization is no longer bound by time and space. Even organizations of the urban poor are now using email and the Internet to network and share experiences with their counterparts worldwide.

Participating in e-democracy

Many digital cities, such as Wellington, New Zealand (http://www.wcc.gov.nz/democracy/), post council meeting schedules, agendas, minutes, and reports on the Internet, while providing opportunities for citizens to report faults or complaints by email. In Minneapolis, USA, an electronic forum enables citizens to directly discuss issues with elected officials, journalists and community leaders (http://www.e-democracy.org/mpls/). To improve access to the Internet, cities such as Bologna, Italy (http://www.comune.bologna.it/), are taking on the role of an Internet Service Provider, facilitating free local access to the Internet. Other cities, such as Bristol, U.K. (http://www.bristolcity.gov.uk), are establishing public access points to the Internet in local communities.

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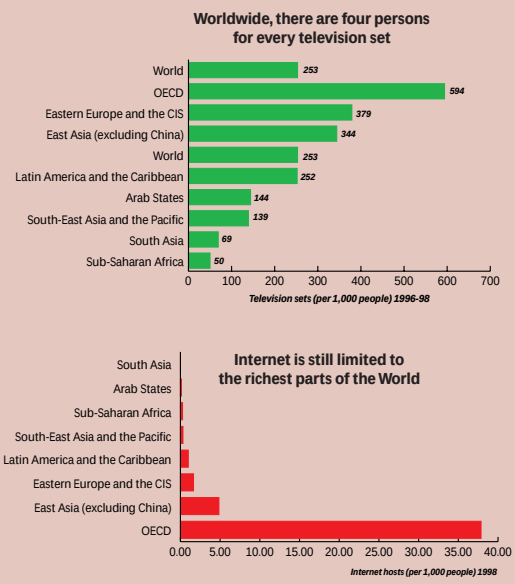
A Nationwide Geographic Information System (GIS) for Improved Planning - Qatar

Due to rapid urban growth, the Qatar government had difficulties in keeping track of new developments and infrastructure requirements, necessitating better access to information for decision-making. Under the National Geographic Information System (GIS) Steering Committee, Qatar has become the first country in the world to implement a comprehensive, integrated and nation-wide GIS. Physical and infrastructure planning capability has been greatly enhanced, and a similar system is now being established in Dubai, UAE.



Source: UNDP, Human Development Report, 2000.

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Perhaps more than any other factor, ICT is responsible for the opening up of political processes to civil society. Citizens and civil society organizations are increasingly made aware of both local and international events via the Internet. International coalitions may form powerful alliances almost instantly to achieve local or global political aims. Opposition movements often gather technical, monetary and moral support from like-minded groups in other countries by communicating their problems and views through their own websites. Roles are expanding as information provision becomes interactive. This is the non-commercial, non-governmental side of the information revolution - the side that is not just people-centred, but people-networked.

Amidst this diversity of actual and potential roles, the digital city needs to address a number of issues, including the importance of leadership in changing bureaucratic cultures; ownership of information, particularly regarding the information rights of the urban poor; and privacy and security for Internet transactions. Other pertinent issues include the emergence of new non-electronic under-classes; expansion of connectivity and individual access; legitimization of citizens' initiatives; recognition of community networks as new forms of political association; use by politicians of the Internet; and managing e-commerce and problems associated with e-crime.

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