

The Digital Divide

10

READING 1

Bill Thompson. "Why the Poor Need Technology," 7 October 2002, in BBC News World Edition (www.bbc.co.uk/).

-- Discussion of Reading 1 -----

1. How many people have access to the Internet, and how many don't have access? (More than 600 million people worldwide have some sort of access to the Internet. About 5.5 billion people do not use the Internet and have no access to it.)
2. According to the graph "Who's Online Where?" on page 114 where do most of the people who lack Internet access live? (They live in Latin American, Africa, and the Middle East.)
3. How true is the assumption that the Internet will soon be generally available to all who want it? (It is not true because the gap in the access to and use of the latest information and communications technologies is as wide as ever, and the consequences are being felt in all the poorer parts of the world.)
4. What principle has the growth of the Internet in the West demonstrated? (It has shown how access to information and communications opportunities has an impact on all aspects of life.)

5. Why could technology be part of the problem, not part of the solution? (Technology could be a problem if we encourage dependency on technology which cannot be maintained and does not meet real needs of people in developing countries.)
6. Explain the two trends that are particularly promising in terms of technologies. (The first is that many developing countries are managing to leapfrog over the industrialized world by using the latest technologies and missing all of the earlier stages, for example, installing a wireless mobile network and using slim laptops with long battery life. Second, we are seeing the development of appropriate technologies like the Simputer.)
7. In what way is access to the Internet a gateway to other resources and to self-reliance? (If people are able to go online, they can find the answers to their questions by themselves.)
8. According to the graph on page 116 “The Top 10 Most Connected Countries,” in 2002, which country was the most connected country in the world? (Iceland)

READING 2

“Africans Embrace Mobiles and the Net,” 2 October 2002, in BBC News World Edition (www.bbc.co.uk/).

-- Discussion of Reading 2 -----

1. What was happening in Africa with regard to the Internet and mobile phones in 2002? (The number of people with Internet accounts in Africa jumped by 20 percent, and the popularity of wireless communication was soaring. More mobiles were connected in the past five years than landlines were installed in the last century.)
2. What was the purpose of the UN Information and Communication Technologies Task Force? (The purpose was to come up with ideas to promote mobile and Internet use in the developing world and help overcome the technology gulf between rich and poor nations.)
3. Explain the remarks made to the task force by the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. (He said that information and communication

technologies could help the poor work their way out of poverty. They cannot solve all the problems, but they are powerful tools for economic growth and poverty eradication, which could facilitate the integration of African countries into the global market.)

4. What did Kofi Annan suggest that the task force investigate? (He said the group should look at low-cost technologies that could be used to provide cheap and fast Internet access.)
5. What type of Internet access is growing fast in Africa? (Internet access via corporate or shared networks is growing fast, as well as access through cyber cafes and telecentres.)
6. How many Africans were online in 2002 compared with North Americans and Europeans? (Only about 1 in 250 Africans is online, compared to 1 in 2 of North Americans and Europeans.)
7. Write a one-sentence statement in your own words of the main idea of the article. (The U.N. Information and Communications Technology Task Force promotes Internet access and mobile phones for developing countries such as Africa as a way to lessen the technology gap between rich and poor nations, increase economic growth, and eliminate poverty.)
8. How has the use of information technology in Africa changed since 2002? Find current statistics that show the percent of the population that can access the Internet and that use mobile phones.

Vocabulary

Fill in the blanks with the correct words. Use each word only once.

concrete	gulf	access	priority
impetus	facilitating	embrace	potential

The 21st century has seen information technology, including computers, mobile phones, handheld devices, and interactive TVs, spread throughout the world, but many people do not live in households, cities, or towns equipped with effective digital networks. The so-called *digital divide* is a term that identifies the wide gap that exists between those who can access the Internet and those who cannot. This gulf can be found both within a country and between the Western developed countries and the developing Third-World countries.

In the United States, the digital divide exists between poor and middle-class homes. Most people in the upper and middle classes own personal computers and mobile phones and use the Internet frequently. However, those in the lower class are disadvantaged in this regard. This inequality was the impetus for a federal government program focusing on education. Starting in 1998, the U.S. government “offered subsidies of up to \$2.2 billion a year to public schools for Web and related communications technology.”¹ These subsidies have been successful in increasing access to the Internet in poor schools whose students are mostly black and Hispanic.²

To some economic analysts, the digital divide offers a/an potential business opportunity. Professor C. K. Prahalad of the University of Michigan believes that “the globe’s poor are a huge—and hugely untapped—market” for global corporations.³ He advocates bringing technology to the poor as a way of creating profitable markets as well as facilitating economic development and stability in poor countries that haven’t benefited from globalization.⁴ An example of this idea is the Simputer, which was conceptualized and built by four Indian scientists. It is a handheld device with a touchscreen that responds aloud in Indian languages and has a variety of functions. For about \$200, users will have Internet access even if they are illiterate because the Simputer uses icons.⁵ Such a/an concrete and practical solution can meet the needs of millions of people in India from poor villagers to slum dwellers. If Indian consumers embrace the Simputer, it will prove that Dr. Prahalad’s theory is correct: Finding ways to bridge the digital divide can bring not only economic, but also humanitarian rewards.

According to *Fortune* magazine, “only 6% of the world has ever logged on to the Internet; perhaps half has never used a phone.”⁶ Indeed, to many people, Internet access is not their top priority. Affordable housing, nourishing food, clean water, and health care are greater necessities. However, policy analysts are convinced that information and communication technologies offer the very poor a solution to their isolation from the modern world. Since this is the Information Age, it is only fair that this powerful resource be made available to all citizens of the 21st century.

1. Gene Koretz. “Narrowing the Digital Divide,” *BusinessWeek*, 9 December 2002, 28.

2. *Ibid.*, 28.

3. Cait Murphy. “The Hunt for Globalization That Works,” *Fortune*, 28 October 2002, 163.

4. *Ibid.*, 164.

5. *Ibid.*, 164.

6. *Ibid.*, 164.