Featured graphic: Digital divide: the geography of Internet access

For many people it is hard to imagine life without the Internet. It permeates daily life; it is the medium through which important communication happens (Castells, 2008); it provides the platform for content that augments our material world (Graham, 2010); and it is a vital source of information about almost every imaginable topic. However, it remains that only a minority of the population on our planet have access. This map was therefore created to better chart the global contours of access.

This map [in colour online] illustrates the raw number of Internet users in each country as well as the percentage of the population with Internet access. It is created using 2008 statistics from the World Bank, which has tracked the number of Internet users per country and the number of Internet connections per 100 people since the 1990s as part of its Worldwide Governance Indicators project. The data are visualised with a cartogram in which the size of each country is drawn based on its proportion of global Internet users. The shading of each country reflects its Internet penetration rate: darker shades indicate higher levels of Internet usage amongst the population. Countries with online populations of less than approximately 2 million have been removed from the map.

We see that the map of the world's online population presents an interesting picture of the locations of Internet users. China has the world's largest total number of Internet users (there are approximately 400 million users in China) despite its relatively low penetration rate. The map also starkly illustrates the relatively small number of users in South America and Africa. The visualisation causes South America to shrink to a size that is smaller than the United States, and Africa to skew unrecognisably on the map. We also see that there are very few countries in the Global South with high Internet penetration rates. This indicates future growth in the total number of Internet users will most likely come from areas that are currently underrepresented.

Ultimately Internet access is only one component of the global digital divides that serve to amplify the differences between the privileged and underprivileged (Graham, 2011). However, it is a prerequisite for many types of communication, information access, and participation in nonlocal cultural, economic, and political processes.

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