

Overestimating the Global Digital Divide

The global digital divide between North and South – the industrialised and the developing countries – is undoubtedly significant. But it is also overestimated.

Why? Because most digital divide statistics implicitly think of the divide in Northern terms that equate use with ownership, and access with use (see diagram).

Northern Model of ICT Access/Use



But in the South, it's different and we need a different model (see diagram below). Ownership is not the same as use. Several users may use one publicly-owned item (e.g. many users per telecentre PC). Several users may use one privately-owned item (e.g. the PC or cell phone shared with friends, relatives, neighbours or colleagues). Statistics from the South may also fail to account for the prevalent use of Northern-based email/Web servers and services by Southern consumers.

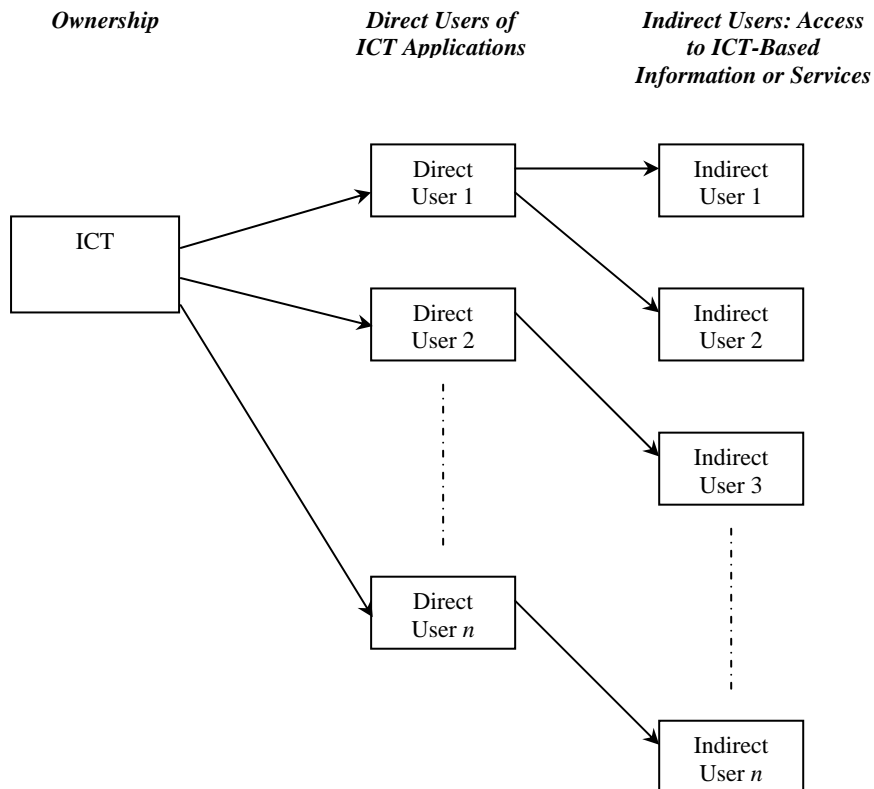
The evidence base on this is smallⁱ. It suggests, though, that direct use rates average five to ten times greater than the ownership rates that tend to be reflected in official figures.

In addition, access is not the same as use. Citizens in the South make use of intermediated access to ICT-based applications: friends, relatives, private providers, etc. will do things like search the Web on behalf of a non-user, or send an email message, or apply for an online license or registration.

Here, the evidence base is even more limited. But take a pessimistic estimate: that each direct user enables only one indirect user to access ICT-based information and services. Even in this case, the current "effective penetration rate" of ICTs in development could be ten to twenty times higher than current estimates.

So what? So what is that, as a result of current data inaccuracies, ICT policy makers and project designers have no sound basis on which to create access policies; infrastructure policies; access-related projects; etc. This creates flawed policies and projects: mistaken assumptions that Northern ideas will transfer easily to the South; ideas vetoed on a mistaken assumption that no critical mass of access exists. To combat this, we need to build a base of sound statistics on the true digital divide, and promote a South-specific model of ICT access and use.

Southern Model of ICT Access/Use



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<http://www.manchester.ac.uk/idpm/dig/briefings.htm>

ⁱ Examples:

- Miller, D. & Slater, D. (2000) *The Internet: An Ethnographic Account*, Berg, Oxford
- Jensen, M. (2001) 'The status of the Internet in Africa', *COMNET-IT Forum*, September
- Alampay, E. (2005) *Rethinking Universal Access Using the Capabilities Approach*, PhD thesis, IDPM, University of Manchester, UK