

## Digital Economies at Global Margins: A Warning from the Dark Side

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Global digital connectivity is widely seen as essential for economic growth (World Bank 2016) and as having significant potential to help attain the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs; ITU 2016). Many examples of successful projects seem to support such arguments for digital development at global margins, from the use of mobiles for financial transactions to health-care interventions, the provision of timely information for farmers, and the use of tablets connected to the Internet in schools (GSMA 2016). There is thus good evidence that some poor people do indeed benefit economically and socially from greater connectivity. Yet, all too often, such initiatives do not go to scale, or are unsustainable, and therefore larger numbers of poor people more generally do not benefit appropriately from such digital interventions.

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have transformed most aspects of human life over the last twenty-five years for those who have access to them, can afford such access, and know how to use them. Yet, the enormous potential that such technologies can enable also means that those who do not have access to them are left relatively more disadvantaged than they were previously. Even those who only have 2G phone connectivity, for example, are now being left far behind by those with smartphones and 4G access. If poverty is defined in a relative sense, digital technologies can thus be seen as increasing relative poverty. They are a powerful accelerator of difference and inequality. This is not to suggest abandoning attempts to use ICTs to contribute to development but it is to argue that at least as much attention needs to be paid to issues of inequality (SDG 10) as to the use of ICTs for economic growth.

Margins are not just geographic. Although connecting remote rural areas to the Internet is more difficult, and thus more costly, many people living in well-connected areas cannot afford such connectivity or are prevented from using the Internet for their empowerment. In patriarchal societies, women are often marginalized in their usage of, and benefit from, ICTs; children living on the streets of major cities fail to benefit from the digital revolution taking place in schools; those with disabilities are widely forgotten. These dimensions of social, political, economic, and cultural marginalization are at least as important as geographic marginalization, and they imply that digital solutions to poverty reduction must be much more subtle and sophisticated than just ensuring that everywhere has connectivity at a reasonably affordable price. Without any connectivity, no one can benefit from the full potential that ICTs can offer, but more needs to be done to support the poorest and most marginalized in their use of ICTs once connectivity is in place.

Recent research by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2016) has shown how those with higher socio-economic status tend to use the Internet for activities that will enhance their status and careers, whereas those from disadvantaged backgrounds use it mainly for chatting or playing games, thereby perpetuating a digital divide based on socioeconomic status. If the poor and marginalized, wherever they are found, are to benefit from connectivity, much more needs to be in place to support and empower them. This goes way beyond the standard arguments surrounding affordability of access, local content, digital literacy, and the provision of infrastructure (World Economic Forum 2016). Above all, it requires all those involved in delivering such interventions to focus primarily on the needs and interests of the poorest and most marginalized, rather than on ensuring that everyone is connected. Rather than advocating connecting the next billion, we should focus first on connecting the “bottom billion,” those I prefer to call the “first billion.”

There is little evidence of sufficient global will to enable this agenda to be realized, largely because the private sector, governments, and even civil society tend to be focused mainly on using the idea and practice of development primarily to serve their own ICT interests (i.e., Development for ICT, D4ICT), rather than on using ICTs for development (ICT4D). This

was typified, for example, in the rush of applications by civil society organizations and others to develop Internet-based solutions for Ebola during the outbreak in Sierra Leone between 2014 and 2016, when less than 5 percent of the country had Internet access. Likewise, the interests of many private sector companies are primarily in generating profits from expanding Internet usage, rather than in enabling poor people to use the Internet effectively to enhance their lives and livelihoods.

The poorest and most marginalized are also more likely to suffer disproportionately from some of the darker aspects of Internet connectivity. As yet, scant research explores the effects of digital crime and abuse on different sections of society, but theft of small amounts of money in online financial transactions will clearly affect someone with little money more dramatically than someone who is richer. Likewise, poor children may be more likely to be targets of abuse through online pornography than are richer children. Women in patriarchal societies are subject to online sexual harassment more than men. Marginalized ethnic groups are particularly vulnerable to ethnic cleansing by governments that increasingly have good digital records about their citizens.

None of this is to suggest that efforts to connect the unconnected should not continue. Without such connectivity, people do not even have the chance to benefit from the potential of ICTs. Nonetheless, it is in everyone's interests to ensure that the poorest and most marginalized are indeed able to be empowered through such technologies. An increasingly digitally marginalized and disenfranchised population is not only morally wrong, it is also a danger to the sustained economic growth that dominates global rhetoric on development. This situation certainly requires appropriate policies by governments at all scales, particularly through their regulatory mechanisms, but above all, the private sector and civil society need to focus more on ICT4D than they do on D4ICT.

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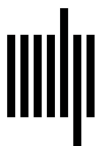
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