Let’s make the Internet equitable

The bulk of the country and its social, economic and political institutions are yet to become a part of our touted information revolution

In the year 2000, when I was compiling a book titled *Internet Economy of India*, my team calculated the money invested in the country for the Internet and related businesses. Dominated by the dotcom business, the total amount was estimated to be $22 billion, or more than India’s software exports at that time. Although most of those investments did not produce successful enterprises, what they did, with the help of the media, is to spread awareness about the Internet.

Figure 1: Students using Internet in one of the cyber café in Vijayapura Hobli village. Photo: Hemant Mishra/Mint.

Today, perhaps every person in the country knows the word Internet and understands what it is all about. India has the world’s third largest Internet user community after the US and China.

In the last 10 years, the Internet has also grown from being synonymous with dotcom to be diversely known through country extensions—for instance, .in in India. Just this month, we have reached 1 million domain names with the .in extension, according to the National Internet Exchange of India (NIXI). This includes all kinds of .in extensions, from .org.in to .ac.in and .co.in.

But despite the growth of the past decade, India’s information economy remains impoverished compared with its potential. Although the third highest in the world, India’s 100 million Internet users are just 8% of its national population. It seems particularly low when we consider that more than 70% Indians are using mobile phones.

While we have a million .in websites, we also have more than 4 million not-for-profit organizations, more than 26 million micro and small companies, more than 1.5 million schools and more than a quarter million government bodies and organizations.

Clearly, the bulk of the country and its social, economic and political institutions are yet to become a part of our touted information revolution—even though we live in an age in which the Internet has become so ubiquitous that not being online can effectively mean you simply don’t exist.

Being on the Internet also enhances transparency, which is crucial for the government and all kinds of institutions, organizations and companies. We have more than 250,000 *panchayats* (village councils), 4,011 assembly constituencies and 543 parliamentary constituencies.

As these are elected bodies with clearly defined responsibilities and categorized funds, isn't it important that all those constituencies should be online? This will not only promote transparency but also allow our cities, towns and villages to tap the potential of the Internet.

The situation is the same vis-a-vis voluntary organizations, schools and micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises. Our Internet presence across the board is as low as 10-20%. The government is planning to have broadband optic fibre network till the *panchayat* level, but that is a far-fetched plan.

The country already has more than 800 million mobile phone connections, and there won't be less than 500 million unique mobile users. Can even half of these be expected to convert into Internet users through mobiles? This can happen—but only if the government and telecom companies push hard for it. N. Ravi Shanker, additional secretary in the information technology ministry, suggests that all telecommunications firms should provide users a free domain name corresponding to their mobile number, with .in extension. Perhaps we need this kind of disruptive thinking.

The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) has allowed the Internet to go beyond the three gTLDs (generic top-level domain) including .com., .net and .org. From next year, we can have any name or word as extension, which means there is an opportunity for India to create more space for itself on the Internet. A number of companies are likely to go for it.

In the government, I will be extremely happy if they apply for .India or .Bharat, and certainly .panchayat. It is also being suggested strongly that government get .Delhi, .Mumbai, .Bangalore, .Chennai, .Kolkata and .Hyderabad and open them for the common good, so that they are not commercially exploited.

One effort in which we are involved is .ngo, which is being advocated by the public interest registry that owns .org. We are aggressively campaigning all over India, Nepal and Bangladesh among non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to adopt the Internet and become visible.

We have already gained about 500 NGOs, but bringing all NGOs on .ngo in the next three-five years will be a huge challenge—as well as an accomplishment I will cherish, not only for them being online but because localized communities coming online will create a better and a more equitable Internet.

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