

Boom times ahead for mobile Web access

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A woman walks in front of a mobile phone company advertisement in Islamabad. After a slow start, mobile Web access has finally taken off, thanks in large part to better technology, and it will drive growth in Internet use in the future, industry leaders say.

After a slow start, mobile Web access has finally taken off, thanks in large part to better technology, and it will drive growth in Internet use in the future, industry leaders say.

"More people in the world will have their first interaction with the Internet with mobile than with laptop," said Internet co-founder Vinton Cerf at a five-day Web conference which wrapped up Friday in Madrid.

There are about three and a half billion [mobile telephones](#) in the world,

and a growing proportion of them are equipped to access the Internet, he added.

Cerf is the vice president and "chief Internet evangelist" of online [search engine Google](#), which has ramped up its [mobile applications](#) since it launched its own mobile operating system called Android two years ago.

The explosion in the number of mobile phones with the capacity to access the Internet will enable millions of people in developing nations who cannot afford computers to go online for the first time, said one of the inventors of the World Wide Web, Tim Berners-Lee.

"The move to mobile access is very important as mobile devices are the first way that people in developing countries get their first contact with the Web," said the British-born Massachusetts Institute of Technology computer scientist.

Just five percent of Africans currently surf the Web, compared to 23 percent of the entire population of the globe, the United Nations' International Telecommunications Union said in a report last month.

While analysts have long argued that a mass market exists for mobile Internet, difficulties in viewing Web pages on the small screens of telephones, PDAs and other portable devices have until recently dampened consumer demand.

But the emergence of portable devices with better user interfaces, beginning with the launch of Apple's [iPhone](#) in June 2007, has vastly boosted the appeal of mobile Web access.

"The iPhone was a major breakthrough. The ability to zoom in and out made it easier to have access to bigger Web pages," said Andreas Girgensohn, a principal scientist at leading US multimedia research

laboratory FXPAL.

The iPhone allows its users to easily scroll multiple Web pages by dragging and zoom in and out of them by double-tapping on the screen.

Apple says studies have shown that 95 percent of iPhone customers regularly surf the Web while Google reports it sees 50 times the number of searches using the iPhone than any other mobile device.

Also fueling the growing appeal of mobile Internet access is the fact that applications and Web sites are now being developed just for portable devices and their smaller size.

"One of the most exciting developments is that the Web is going mobile. We can finally access all these things anywhere, anytime," said Belgian software scientist Robert Cailliau who designed the Web with Berners-Lee in 1989.

The development of better smartphones coincides with the rise in Web-enabled versions of typical household appliances such as refrigerators and microwave ovens that allow users to access the Internet.

Cerf predicted there will be more and more of these so-called "Internet appliances" as well as more appliances that can be controlled over the Web.

"We will have more Internet, larger numbers of users, more mobile access, more speed, more things online and more appliances we can control over the Internet," he said.

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