

Democracy not vital for Internet to flourish in some countries: study

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As the Internet spreads across the globe, countries don't necessarily need democracy to join the online community, a new study from Ohio State University has found.

Rather, [social factors](#) such as population growth and violent conflict are much more important -- and capitalism trumps them all.

In a recent issue of the journal [Sociological Inquiry](#), researchers report their 12-year study of the social and economic barriers that prevent some countries from crossing the "digital divide" that separates them from Internet-saturated countries such as the United States.

When Edward Crenshaw, professor of sociology at Ohio State, and then-student Kristopher Robison published preliminary results from this study in 2000, they found just the opposite -- that countries needed the freedoms of democracy to cross the digital divide.

China, a pro-capitalist autocracy, has since joined the Internet by virtue of being an economic powerhouse. While the country struggles to restrict citizens' access to information from the rest of the world, China has succeeded in making the Internet part of its economy.

The study shows that even authoritarian countries can expand their use of the Internet for the sake of global commerce.

Once these countries reach a critical mass of Internet users, however,

their society may breed democratic movements, the researchers noted in their report. Growing urbanization, in particular, would boost Internet use and could loosen a government's grip on how its people use the technology.

"The internet is just too pervasive," Crenshaw said. "Governments can't keep the brakes on it."

Crenshaw and Robison measured the amount of Internet development in different regions of the world by calculating the average number of Internet users per 1,000 people between 1995 and 2007. They compared the amount of Internet use in each region to Internet use in North America.

The data came from the International Telecommunications Union. Data concerning the countries' political, social and economic conditions came from the World Bank World Development Indicators 2006 report.

The study showed that the digital divide is narrowing. In Western Europe in 1995, for instance, only 60 percent as many people used the Internet as in North America. By 2007, the number had risen to 96 percent.

But Western Europe is the only region of the world with connectivity even remotely close to that of North America as of 2007. All other regions in the study fell below 50 percent, notably Eastern Europe (49 percent), Latin America (42 percent), Asia (40 percent) and Oceania (34 percent). North Africa (21 percent), Sub-Saharan Africa (7 percent) and the Middle East (33 percent) experienced the most growth in Internet use during the study.

Urbanization is a key driver of [Internet use](#), Crenshaw said. Cities supercharge a country's ability to go online, because they bring together upper and middle class folks, who are more likely to adopt new

technologies than the lower classes. Big cities often host universities, which raise the overall education level and bring new technologies as well.

Countries torn by violence often lose technology-adopting upper and middle class residents, because they have the means to escape to safety, he added.

High fertility rates diminish a nation's ability to go online, as adults are likely putting all their wealth and energies into raising their children. Conversely, a country with low fertility rates but a large work force is the ideal setting for technology adoption, because adults presumably have the time and money to invest.

To Crenshaw, the study speaks to a larger issue, that of United Nations (UN) efforts to bring the Internet to remote parts of the globe. The UN's Internet Governance Forum (IGF) is working to "make the most of the Internet to boost social and economic well-being for the greatest number of people around the world," according to the IGF Web site. The hope is that poor nations can use the Internet to enhance education, engage in global commerce, and receive donations.

"I just don't see the Internet happening in countries that are facing tremendous social problems like violence and poverty. Our study indicates that those pressing social issues need to be addressed first, before the technology can really take hold," he said. "I'm afraid that bringing the Internet to those countries is like putting the cart before the horse."

Crenshaw and Robison -- now an assistant professor at Northern Illinois University -- were surprised to discover that strong capitalism can reduce a country's need for democracy to help the Internet flourish.

They will likely continue this research, but Crenshaw feels that the results of future studies will be hard to predict.

"The Internet is evolving rapidly. I wouldn't lay good money on what we'll find next time," he said.

Provided by The Ohio State University

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