

Google guns for 300 mn new Indian local language users (Update)

November 3 2014, by Penelope Macrae



Google has created a new Hindi-language website to add 300 million Indian Internet users by 2017 and bridge the country's linguistic digital divide, the search giant announced

Search giant Google announced Monday the creation of a new Hindi-language website in an ambitious bid to add 300 million Indian Internet users by 2017 and bridge the country's linguistic digital divide.

The website, www.hindiweb.com, new Hindi-language voice-search and Hindi keyboard are part of Google's push to incorporate more Indian languages into content in the next few years.

Google said nearly all of India's 198 million English speakers are already online.

Now Google is targeting the around one billion people who do not speak English, starting with Hindi, listed by 41 percent of the 1.2 billion population as their mother tongue, according to census data.

"To reach our goal of 500 million Internet users by 2017 (from 200 million currently), we need to make the Internet accessible to those who don't speak English," Google India managing director Rajan Anandan told reporters.

The announcement chimes with the goal of the new Indian government of Narendra Modi which has embarked on what it calls a "digital revolution" to bring more Indians online to access government, education and health services and transact more business.

"The web holds great potential to empower many Indians economically and socially, and thanks to the smartphone revolution, many millions of Indians will be coming online for the first time in the next few years," Anandan said.

'More accessible for my mom'

The Internet initially was mainly the preserve of India's affluent, urban, English-speaking middle-class.

Tens of millions of increasingly affordable smartphones are being sold each year in India, and are becoming the new route for Indians to get

online, but they lack content in their own languages.

"We must build content in people's own languages—otherwise we'll miss the boat," Anandan said.

"The net will not be very useful for them," he said.

Offering local languages would boost India's already exponentially growing online shopping market, for instance, as well as advertising markets, Google executives said.

Hindi and English are both official languages for federal government business while India's constitution recognises 22 official languages.

The government sees greater use of Internet technology as a means to spur growth in Asia's third-largest-economy where more than 700 million people live on less than \$2 a day, according to the World Bank.

Google said it was setting up an Indian Language Internet Alliance—made up of newspaper, television, web content companies and other players—to promote growth of local-language content.

Google said it aimed to offer web services in at least eight major Indian languages, including Bengali, Telegu, Marathi and Tamil, but declined to give a timeline.

The company's Indian-born search architect Amit Singhal, who is based at its California headquarters, said the Hindi website would make the Internet "more accessible for people like my mom".

Singhal, who has steered development of Google's global search engine, said his mother understands English but would be much more comfortable using her native Hindi to access the Internet.

But among problems faced in encouraging Internet use are still low web speeds. India's plans to connect villages to fast Internet through the National Optical Fibre Network were meant to be completed by 2013 but now the government is targeting 2016.

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