Digital Inequality

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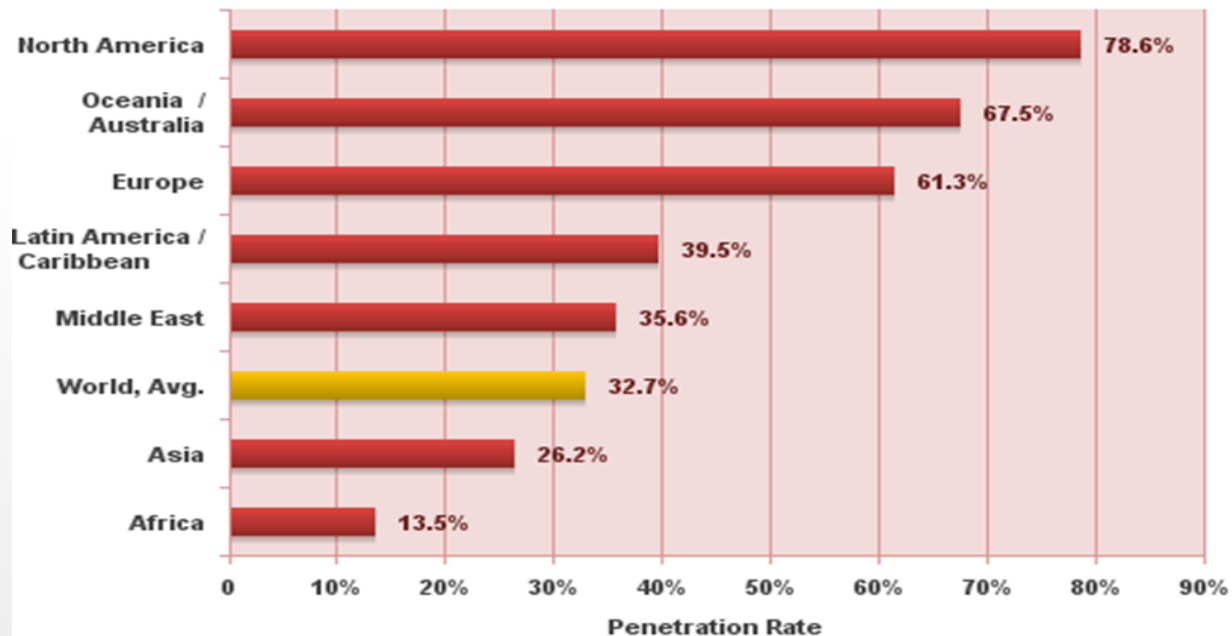# Introduction

- The Web as a force for democratization, egalitarianism:

    – Access to vast quantities of information

    – Ability to navigate this efficiently

    – Low barriers to entry, as consumer

    – Low barriers to entry, as producer (Web 2.0)

- Transcending older, centralised power structures

A Digital Divide?

- Inequalities of *access*

- Inequalities in *usage*

- Inequalities in *advantages* conferred

- Inequalities in *control* of content

- Aim today: to review these arguments and identify key questions →

Inequalities of Access

World Internet Penetration Rates by Geographic Regions - 2011

Region	Penetration Rate
North America	78.6%
Oceania / Australia	67.5%
Europe	61.3%
Latin America / Caribbean	39.5%
Middle East	35.6%
World, Avg.	32.7%
Asia	26.2%
Africa	13.5%

Source: Internet World Stats - www.internetworldststs.com/stats.htm
Penetration Rates are based on a world population of 6,930,055,154
and 2,267,233,742 estimated Internet users on December 31, 2011.
Copyright © 2012, Miniwatts Marketing Group

- Majority of the world's population does not have access to the Web

- Access heavily weighted to US/(Western)Europe/Australasia

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Global inequalities

- Lack of access as a form of social exclusion?

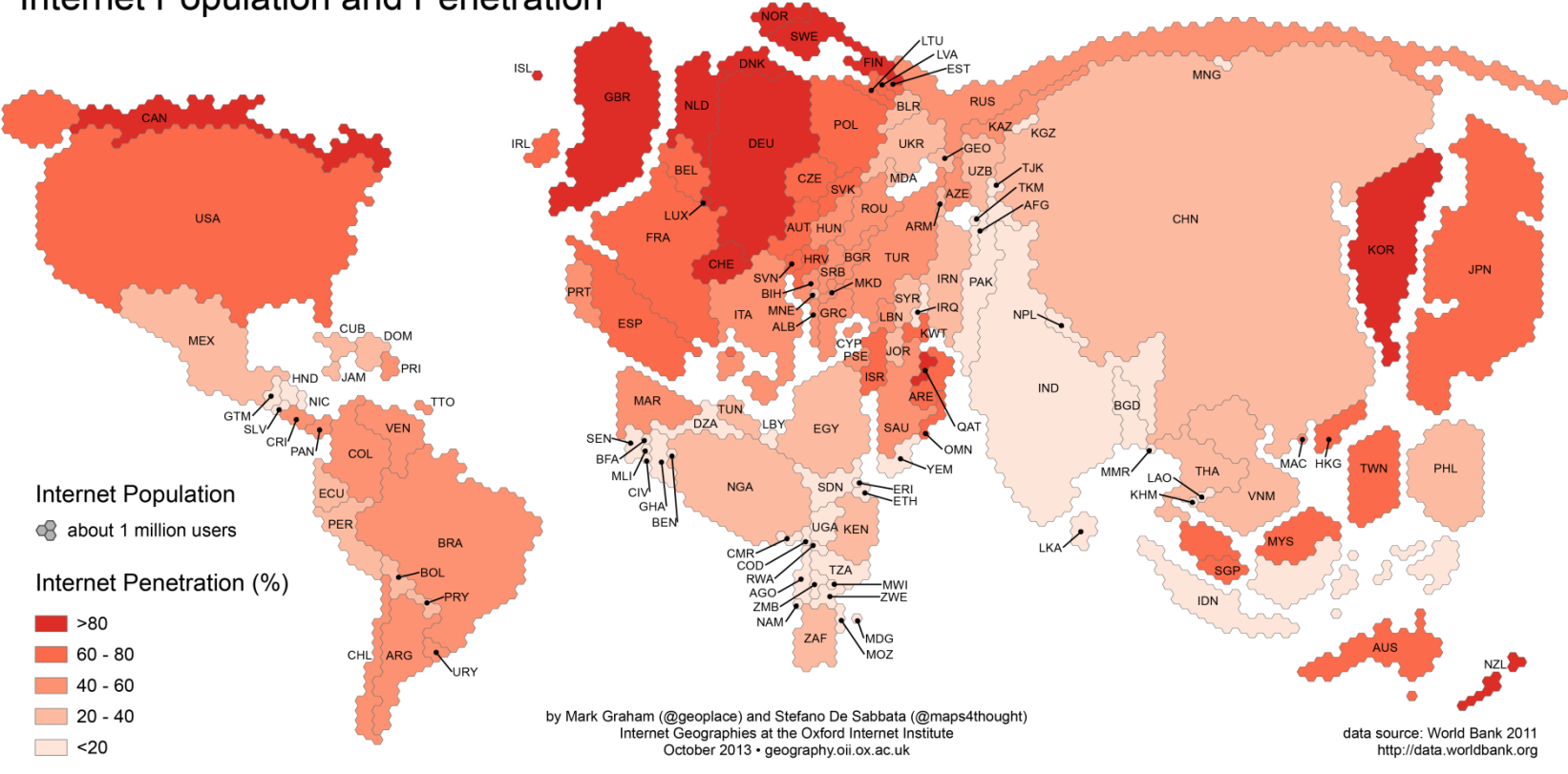- Reproducing/exacerbating inequalities – widening inequality?

- Between countries:

    http://ucatlas.ucsc.edu/communication/int_per_100.html

    http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/8552410.stm

- And within countries

Internet Population and Penetration

Internet Population
about 1 million users

Internet Penetration (%)
- >80
- 60 - 80
- 40 - 60
- 20 - 40
- <20

by Mark Graham (@geoplace) and Stefano De Sabbata (@maps4thought)
Internet Geographies at the Oxford Internet Institute
October 2013 • geography.oii.ox.ac.uk

data source: World Bank 2011
http://data.worldbank.org

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Global inequalities

- Lack of access as a form of social exclusion?

- Reproducing/exacerbating inequalities – widening inequality?

- Between countries:

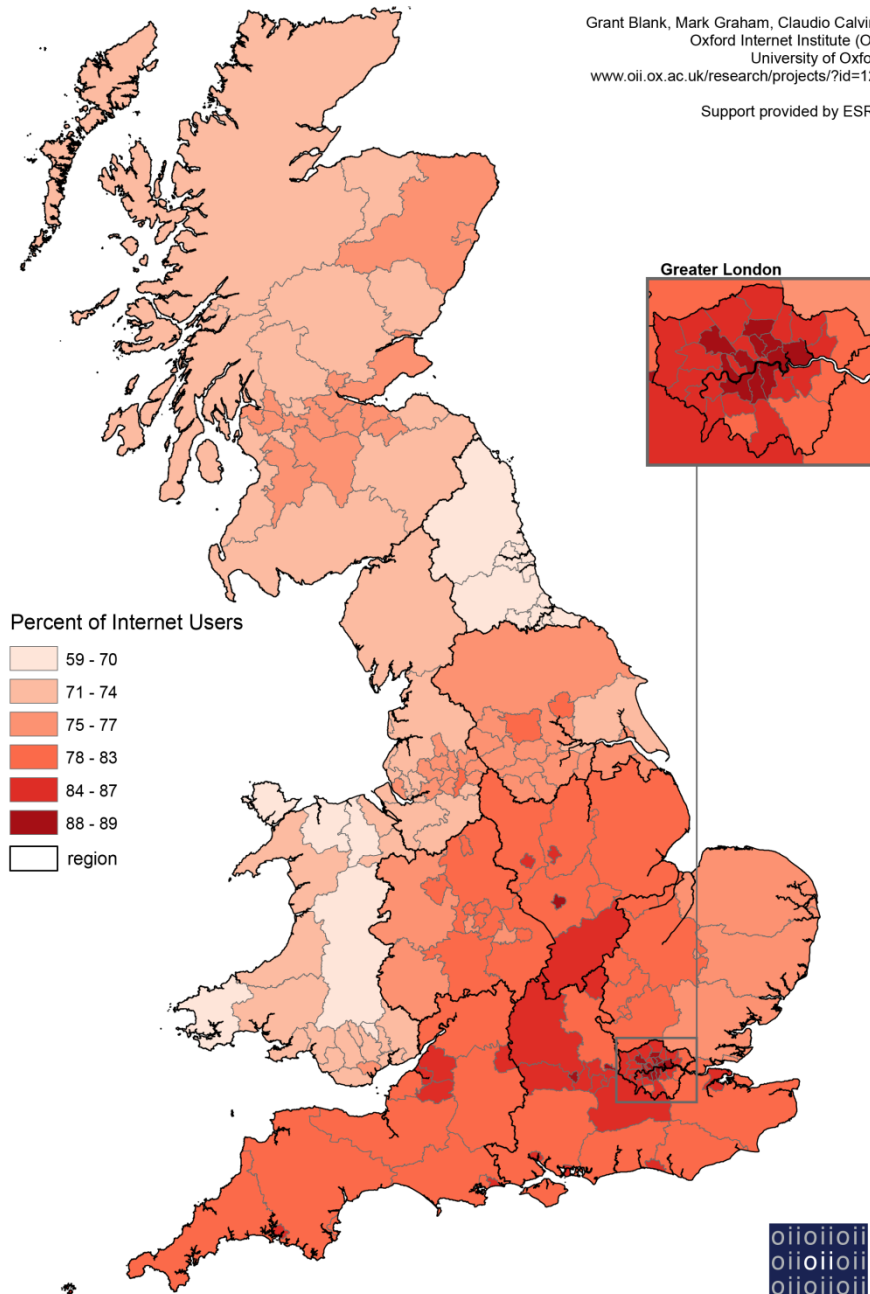 http://ucatlas.ucsc.edu/communication/int_per_100.html

  http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/8552410.stm

- And within countries

Local Internet Use in Britain

Grant Blank, Mark Graham, Claudio Calvino
Oxford Internet Institute (OII)
University of Oxford
www.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/projects/?id=123

Support provided by ESRC

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Greater London

Percent of Internet Users

- 59 - 70
- 71 - 74
- 75 - 77
- 78 - 83
- 84 - 87
- 88 - 89
- region

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Access to Hardware

- Initial policy focus from mid-1990s

- In international development and in national policy interventions

- Inequalities between and within countries

- Not an individual matter: internet access disproportionately = wealthier, white, male, urban, higher levels of education.

- For example, in the US in 1999 there was:

  – A 20 fold lower level of internet access between the richest households ($75K+) and the poorest (under $15k)

  – 27% whites accessed the internet at home; the figure for blacks and Hispanics was 9%

  – 18-fold lower computer and internet access among female headed households with dependent children cf. households managed by married families with children

  Source: Gilbert and Masucci 2011

→ interventions:

  - library access

  - community technology centres

  - laptops for schoolchildren

- To provide access to the 'have nots'

- But inequalities persist:

- In the US (2007) 29% of the population does not use the internet (NITA 2007)

- In the UK (2009) 15m people do not use the internet (BIS 2009)

- Not evenly spread: age, socio-economic group and whether or not there are children in the household all make a big difference

- Ofcom 'Accessing the Internet at Home' (2008)

Age	% with domestic internet access
75+	24%
65-74	47%
55-64	67%
45-54	87%
25-44	90%

SEC	% with domestic internet access
A, B, C1	87%
C2, D, E	63%

Source: Ofcom (2008) Accessing the Internet at Home

- In short:

  – Access continues to be a problem, but

  – Even given access people don't necessarily use it

  – There is a 'core-resister' (Ofcom 2008) group (of which more later)

  – Questions of use maybe as important as access

Beyond Hardware?

- Access model assumes that internet is a general good, with shared benefits for all

- Idea of 'core resisters' assumes non-use is perverse

- Cf. problematizing the Web, seeing the web from the point of view of individuals in the context of their everyday lives.

- Gilbert and Masucci (2011) *Strategies for Bridging the Digital Divide* Praxis (e)press

Information and Communication Technology Geographies

Strategies for Bridging the Digital Divide

Melissa R. Gilbert
Michele Masucci

http://www.praxis-epress.org/availablebooks/ictgeographies.html
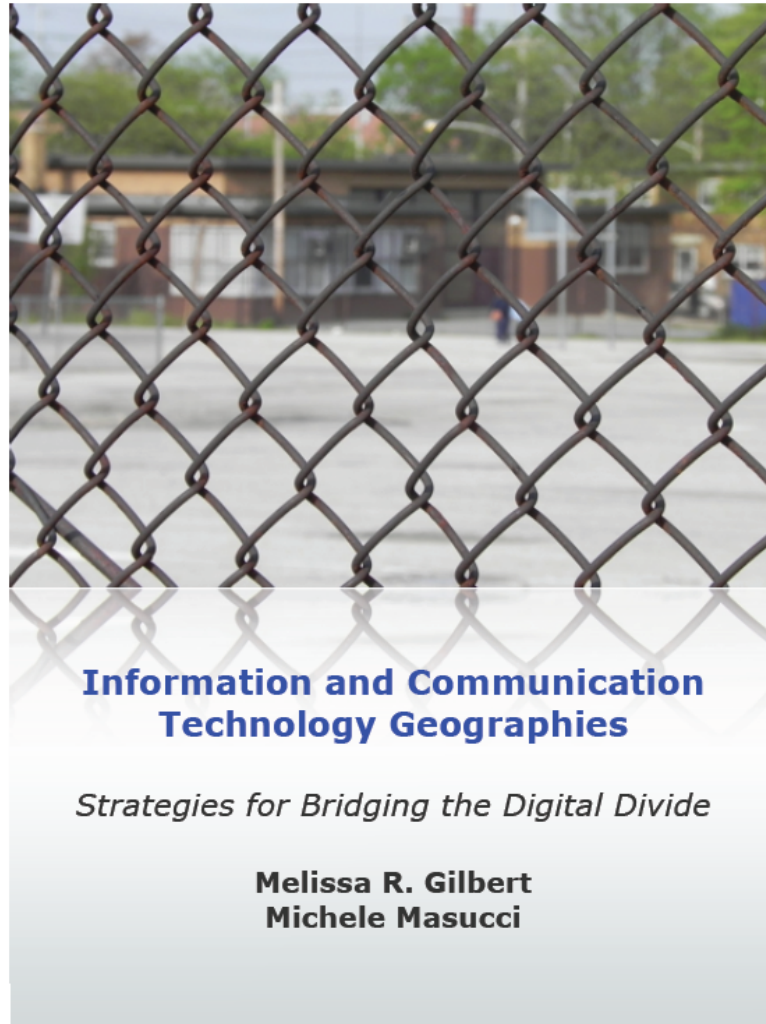
- Access alone is insufficient

- Skills required – basic and more advanced

- Eszter Hargittai (2008) – *'some uses are more likely to yield beneficial outcomes than others e.g. might increase access to advantageous resources – enabling users to acquire valuable labour market skills, economic benefits or social networks – others types of use might 'downright disadvantage the uninformed'.*

- Gilbert and Masucci

  – Social action research in North Philadephia

  – Exploring the web from the perspective of some of the most marginalised people in the US

  – Harrison Plaza – CTC

  – KWRU – campaign group

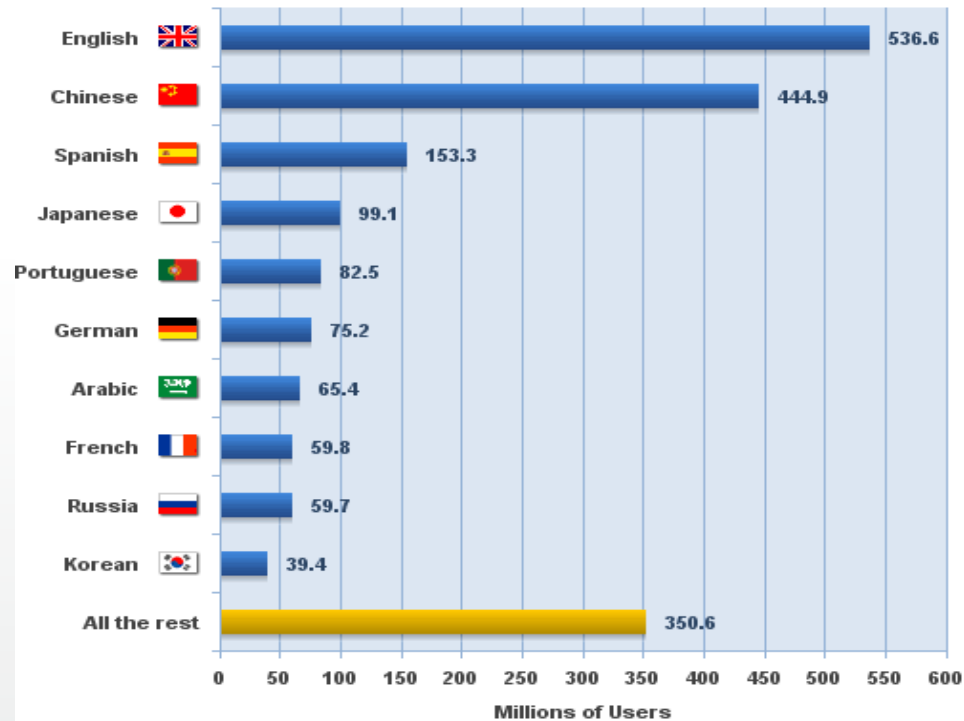- *Power and inequality, not access or demographics*

- Implications beyond North Philadelphia in the late 2000s?

  – Reconceptualising core resisters as people making realistic decisions about their lives

  – Reconceptualise normative accounts of the web: not a uniform good

  – Consider the impact of mobile internet access (but don't return to hardware driven 'solutions')

The Politics of the Web

- Content

- Ownership

- Control – surveillance – corporate power

Top Ten Languages in the Internet
2010 - in millions of users

Language	Millions of Users
English	536.6
Chinese	444.9
Spanish	153.3
Japanese	99.1
Portuguese	82.5
German	75.2
Arabic	65.4
French	59.8
Russia	59.7
Korean	39.4
All the rest	350.6

Source: Internet World Stats - www.internetworldstats.com/stats7.htm
Estimated Internet users are 1,966,514,816 on June 30, 2010
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The Politics of the Web

- Content e.g. language

- Ownership

- Control – surveillance

- Media giants

  http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/8562801.stm

- The Filter Bubble – Eli Pariser
  http://www.ted.com/talks/eli_pariser_beware_online_filter_bubbles.html

-> calls for ever more skilled users

Conclusions

- Unpicking and understanding if and how the web is linked to inequality means:

    – Recognising that the access divide is not over

    – Thinking beyond hardware

    – Thinking beyond demographic variables

    – Developing a conceptual and theoretical toolkit

        - Beyond technological determinism
        - Co-constitution
        - Intersectionality
        - Technical capital

    – Building a politics of data, artefacts and infrastructure

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Why does this matter for Web Science?

– Who is the web 'for'?

– What does the web 'do'?

– Can the web be pro-human?

– How can we shape the evolution of the Web?

- Why/does this matter for Web Science?