

Internet

Concept: Internet

Author: Leslie A. Pal , Carleton University

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Description The Internet is the global communications system that permits all types of electronic data to be sent via networks of computers, and increasingly other technologies such as telephones and television as they move to digital formats. The Internet has its origins in the 1960s, in part in US military research on communications systems that could withstand a nuclear attack. Whereas conventional telephone circuit switching sent data from point to point, the essential idea behind "packet switching" was that data could be broken down at the point of transmission, sent over distributed networks of computers, and reassembled at the point of delivery. With the advent of the World Wide Web in the mid-1990s, vast amounts of data and communications in all forms (text, audio, graphics) could be put on the web and accessed from anywhere.



(Photo: Luis Barnola, IDRC-CRDI)

E-mail allows low-cost, instantaneous, networked communication while the Web permits virtually universal and low-cost access to, and distribution of, information. Together, these aspects of the Internet have greatly accelerated processes of globalization. People from all corners of the

planet can communicate easily with each other. Organizations can share information with citizens and other organizations all around the world. This has had several implications for globalization and autonomy. On the one hand, the Internet strengthens the capacities of individuals because it lets them communicate more easily, and it enhances the capacities of organizations — from terrorist groups and criminal elements to democratic movements — to mobilize around issues. On the other hand, it has reinforced the use of English in communications around the globe, and provided yet another channel for Western commercial culture to spread outside of North America and Europe. Finally, it reminds us that globalization and its effects are not evenly distributed. There still remain costs of entry to access to the web, both in infrastructure cost and technical knowledge that elude many in developing countries, where the number of people "on-line" is much lower than in industrialized nations.