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World Wide Web? Say that in my language please!

Is the internet of any use to a world that doesn't speak English?

By Vipin V Nair 16 Nov 2005

For Sudhakaran, a manual worker in the southern Indian city of Kochi, information on where to find a cance drug is just a click away on the computer.

But he is unable to access the drug. Internet cafes may be mushrooming all around him but Sudhakaran ha a major handicap: he does not understand English, and so cannot visit the relevant websites.

People like Sudhakaran are so near to the 'information superhighway' that criss-crosses India, yet they are kept out by language barriers.

Across the world, millions of people are baffled by the predominance of the English language on the net. Their inability to read and understand English has denied them the power of the internet. They are embarrassed and often scared to log on.

More than money and technology, it seems it is language that is fuelling the global digital divide. Those wh can use English are free to enjoy the benefits of the internet, accessing the information they need in the most effective way the world has ever known. Others are miserably left out.

As much as 70 per cent of all internet content is in English. But only 44 per cent of users are native Englis speakers.

A key issue

The issue of language is crucial to countries like India, which has scores of languages and hundreds of dialects.

African languages, which number over 2,000 and account for a third of the world's languages, has an abysmally low representation on the web.

Only two per cent of African languages, such as Swahili, Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Luganda, Masai, Sesotho a Shona, are thought to be online; even fewer have online resource materials such as dictionaries, libraries and translated documents.

Experts say this lack of local language content and software tools is in turn rapidly pushing out the use and sharing of traditional knowledge, including medicine.

People taking action

People across the world appear to be waking up to this problem. In India, for instance, the federal government has rolled out a series of initiatives to create local language fonts and software tools.

The Centre for Development of Advanced Computing (C-DAC), a government body, has released severa pieces of software for major local languages, such as Hindi, Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Bengali and Punjabi,

including some in the open source mode.

The Open Knowledge Network project of OneWorld South Asia, a non-governmental organisation, collates local knowledge on a raft of subjects, such as traditional medicine, and puts them up on an open source platform so others can not only access the information but also add to it.

Using the Open Knowledge Network, people in Africa, Asia and Latin America are able to create digital content in their own languages, which is then exchanged with others through networks of existing communi access points run by 'Community Reporters'.

Sensing the huge potential of 'rural markets' where English is not widely used, multinational corporations such as Microsoft are aggressively rolling out their software with local language interfaces. Opera Software a startup with a rapidly growing web browser, recently introduced Hindi and Punjabi versions.

However, there is also a fear that if the so-called rural markets do not translate into large enough profits, corporate interest in facilitating local language content may wane.

What is imperative is that governments, NGOs and private corporations – the so-called multi-stakeholder partnership – make sustained efforts to ensure that local language content and software is generated over the long term.

Otherwise, the danger is that Sudhakaran and others like him around our connected world will log off for good.

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