

**PANEL: GLOBAL CULTURE, LOCAL CULTURE, AND
VERNACULAR COMPUTING**

The Excluded 95% in South Asia

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The growing importance of digital computation and telecommunication (“the Information Age”) is closely allied to the emergence of a global culture mediated by satellites, television, Internet, and the Web. This culture is currently dominated by enterprises in the Northern, and in particular in the English-speaking nations: e.g., Disney, CNN, Murdoch, MTV, Microsoft, Intel, etc. The products it sells in the newly liberalized economies of the world are generally those of major multi-nationals: Nestle, Philips, Ford, Visa, Sheraton, etc. Whether in Bombay, Nairobi, Buenos Aires, Karachi, Kathmandu, Dhaka, or Jakarta, the power of this global, media-driven, advertising-based, mass-market culture is growing steadily. Although sometimes “dubbed” in local languages, the content of this culture varies little from nation to nation.

Especially as far as computers and electronic communication are concerned, a central feature of the new global culture is its foundation in the English language. All the major operating systems and most of the widely used applications are American in origin (Microsoft, IBM, UNIX, Corel, Lotus, Digital, Java, etc.); all of the top ten software companies are American with the exception of SAP Ag. The majority of Internet and Web sites in the world are either entirely in English or have an English option.

To be sure, peoples who speak North European languages like French, Spanish, German, or Swedish, etc. are often well-served by the efforts of internationalization of the major software companies. Thus, localized operating systems and major applications exist, for example, for Windows 95, Windows NT and Office, Word Perfect, Apple’s OS, and so on in more than a dozen languages, mostly European, with other European languages still to come. Some European nations like France require that all software legally sold within its boundaries be fully localized to the national language. But despite the

linguistic nationalism of the French, many French sites have English mirrors, and French authorities remain vocally concerned about the “invasion” of English language and “Anglo-Saxon” culture.

The power of this new global culture -- if indeed it can be called a culture at all -- is such that it indeed threatens local cultures and vernacular languages. To conservative adherents of local cultures, especially in the developing nations, the new “Western” global media are often seen as politically subversive, culturally corrosive, and/or morally unacceptable. Nations like China have made successful attempts to block politically unacceptable satellite TV transmissions, and new PRC regulations have been issued to attempt to prevent politically unacceptable Internet uses. The related question of “pornography” arises with particular intensity in conservative countries where full access to the Web may be blocked to prevent such uses. Most important, the global perception that “Western” media and “Western” values are subverting ancient, rooted, traditional cultural norms, outlooks and languages constitutes an important force behind fundamentalist reactions in every part of the world.

A critical element in the increasing hegemony in “global culture” is the dominance of the English language in computation and international electronic communication. The opposite side of this coin is the effective exclusion from the Information Age of the great majority of the world’s population that does not speak English -- or perhaps another readily accessible European language. To be sure, in the case of a few countries, like the PRC, American firms have made major (although incomplete) efforts to “localize” major programs for a potential future Chinese market (the present market being limited by a 90+% piracy rate.) But for much of the rest of the developing world, the inaccessibility of computers and electronic communications to people who do not speak English constitutes an impossible hurdle to entry into the Information Age.

The panel will take South Asia as an example of problems that may arise in other developing countries where localization to vernacular languages is inadequate.

Of a total South Asian population of approximately 1.2 - 1.3 billion people (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives), at least 50 million, or approximately 5%, speak excellent English. South Asia contains the world’s second or third largest English-speaking population (the US is number 1, Britain is number 2 or number 3), the world’s third largest scientific population, the world’s third largest number of university graduates -- almost all of whom speak good English. This 5% constitutes the governing political, economic and cultural elite of their nations. Their mastery of English is such that they have few problems participating in the global English-speaking electronic culture.

This panel will focus on the excluded 95%. We will examine some of the economic, political and cultural factors that limit participation in the Electronic

Age by the non-English-speaking populations, concentrating especially on India and Nepal. Attention will be given to nationalist reactions against the English-speaking elite, to failed and successful efforts to develop standardized formats for localization to vernacular languages, to the real (and imagined) problems faced by North American software firms in dealing with South Asia, and to the emerging conflicts in South Asia between incompatible standards for Internet and Web communication in vernacular languages.

