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How should the Chinese government provide information services for Mongol ethnic minority?

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore a holistic approach to providing information services for China's Mongol ethnic minority, in light of their ethnic characteristics and socioeconomic conditions, to help bridge the digital divide. We developed a framework for Mongol-centered information services to analyze the relationships between various factors, including language, culture, types of information, access to information and communication technology (ICT), ICT skills, educational level, and attitudes toward information services. A survey was conducted to determine the status of the Mongols' access to and use of information services, in which we adopted a two-stage sampling procedure and face-to-face interviews, taking into account Mongolian culture and demographics. The results indicated that three Mongolian groups access to different communication devices, need different information, mostly prefer the service in Mongolian, encounter some difficulties, but all have a positive attitude toward government information services. Accordingly, several policy recommendations were offered. Finally, we concluded that the government should carefully examine the ethnic characteristics of Mongols, particularly their language and culture, use easily accessible and practical approaches to providing Mongol-centered information services, instead of those sophisticated but inaccessible ways. Other multiethnic countries can draw some insights from this study on how to provide information to their indigenous people.

1. Introduction

China is a multiethnic country comprising the majority Han and 55 ethnic minorities (EMs).[①] These EMs mostly have their own languages, distinctive culture and unique lifestyles, which are primarily scattered across the underdeveloped basins, mountains and grasslands of western China (Fu, Zuo, & Lenihan, 2011; Gustafsson & Sai, 2009; Ma, 2006). For a long time, the socioeconomic development of western ethnic regions has significantly lagged behind eastern China, owing to geographical disadvantages, educational backwardness, insufficient investment, and so on (Cao, 2010; Wu & Song, 2014). This imbalance in regional development has led the Chinese government to prioritize these ethnic regions in order to achieve its goal of building a "harmonious society" (Hu, 2012). Today, promoting the socioeconomic development of ethnic regions has become one of the most urgent tasks facing the Chinese government.

However, the digital divide is a major obstacle to accomplishing this task (CNNIC, 2009) According to the Report on the Digital Divide in China 2013 by the State Information Center of China, almost all of the information and communication technology (ICT) indicators for western areas are significantly below that of eastern China, indicating a considerable gap in physical access and poor ICT infrastructure in ethnic regions (SIC, 2013). In addition, EMs' average educational level is lower than that of the people in eastern China, and they generally lack basic ICT skills (CNNIC, 2009). Moreover, the provision of information services primarily in Chinese is a barrier to using these services by those EMs who can only speak their own language. With the growing importance of ICT in individuals' occupations and daily life in China, such a gap in ICT access and use between EMs and the majority population may result in a wider social and economic divide (Loo & Ngan, 2012). It is imperative, therefore, to address the digital divide for the sake of Chinese EMs.

Delivering instructive and easily accessible information services to EMs can help bridge this digital divide, and the Chinese governments' information service is one of the most promising approaches to achieving this goal (Du, 2013). As a primary function of Chinese e-government, this service offers the public a range of information, such as government information, job information, social care information, weather service, and agricultural techniques (FAO, 2012; Wang & Chen, 2012). Due to the absence of rural libraries and other reliable information sources, government information services have become the major source of information for Chinese rural citizens (Liu, 2012; Xia, 2010). Given that Chinese EMs mainly live in rural areas, these services play an important role in informing EMs.

Nevertheless, there are still no practical strategies or effective methods on how to provide information services to Chinese EMs, and

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① For information concerning China's ethnic minorities, please consult http://www.seac.gov.cn/col/col107/index.html.

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to the best of our knowledge, few studies have been conducted on this issue, in either the Chinese or English literature. Other countries can offer little experience or knowledge on how they provide information to their indigenous people as well, such as the American Indians, African tribes, Canada's First Nations, and New Zealand's Maoris. In fact, little attention has been paid so far to their access to and use of ICT (Haas, 2005). These ethnic groups who are on the periphery of the information society seem to be neglected by governments and academic communities. In an ever-changing technological world, without the necessary support, they may face even more difficulties when participating in the information society (Gordon, Gordon, & Dorr, 2003). Obviously, researchers and policymakers need to give more attention to these indigenous people around the world.

This study examines the Mongol ethnic minority, living in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region of China, to explore a holistic approach, which takes account of their ethnic characteristics and socioeconomic conditions, to providing government information services and helping bridge the digital divide.

2. Literature review

The indigenous EM, as a traditionally disadvantaged group, is a major concern for the international community, in terms of addressing the social and economic gap between them and the majority population (Battiste, 2011; Castro & Nielsen, 2001; UN, 2007). With the rapid development of ICT, academics and policymakers have reached a consensus that using ICT can help them integrate into the host society and promote cultural diversity (Haas, 2005). This section reviews the literature related to this topic, as well as the potential approaches to providing information services for China's Mongols.

2.1. Indigenous ethnic minorities and the digital divide

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2nd Ed.), ethnic minority is defined as "a group differentiated from the main population of a community by racial origin or cultural background." However, countries around the world seem to have a different understanding of EMs. In EU countries, most EMs are immigrants from eastern European countries and the Third World, and so the term "immigrant and ethnic minority (IEM)" is used widely (Kluzer, Hache, & Codagnone, 2008). The US government and academic community, on the other hand, are more likely to use the term "racial and ethnic minorities," incorporating African Americans, Asians, Hispanics, American Indians, Pacific Islanders, Aleuts, and Eskimos (Pollard & O'Hare, 1999). In China and most developing countries, however, the vast majority of EMs are indigenous people, who are native residents of these countries from ancient times (Ma, 2006). By further subdividing EMs into the indigenous and immigrant, the former are more likely to have a bad socioeconomic condition than the latter, though both are often viewed as disadvantaged people. This may be partly because indigenous EMs mostly live in remote and isolated areas while immigrant EMs are more likely in cities.

With the advent of the information age, the digital divide emerged, which reflects the gap between the information rich and information poor (Bertot, 2003; Wilson, Wallin, & Reiser, 2003). With regard to the digital divide between EMs and the majority population, some academics have named it the ethnic digital divide (Kim, Jung, & Ball-Rokeach, 2007). Multifaceted barriers result in this digital divide that goes beyond the simple dichotomy between technology 'haves' and 'have-nots' (Bertot, 2003; Van Dijk & Jan, 2006). Based on a systematic review of researches on the digital divide, Van Dijk and Jan (2005) proposed a "cumulative and recursive model of successive kinds of access to digital technologies," which consists of four types of access: motivational, physical, skills, and usage access. Following Van Dijk's model, the level of ICT access available to indigenous EMs can be analyzed from these four perspectives.

2.1.1. Motivational access

Due to concerns about technological colonialism and culture assimilation, many indigenous EMs, especially older people, are suspicious of Western technologies, and therefore, they sometimes refuse to accept ICT programs "imposed" upon them (Hughes & Dallwitz, 2007; Kamira, 2003). In addition, the diffusion rate of ICT varies across different cultural groups, and so ethnic culture may also be related to attitudes toward technologies (Srinivasan, 2007; Srite & Karahanna, 2006). In general, those groups with a culture stressing efficiency and cost-effectiveness will adopt ICT sooner and popularize it faster (Gallivan & Srite, 2005). However, many indigenous EMs living in remote areas have no such technologically oriented culture (Berman & Tettey, 2001). Besides, many indigenous EMs have their own language but most information and services is only available in the majority language, primarily in English. This language barrier also increases the difficulty of using ICT, and thus, further reduces these groups' intention to adopt new technologies.

2.1.2. Physical access

Many indigenous groups live in remote areas and experience lack of physical access to information and e-services due to their geographical remoteness and the absence of ICT infrastructure (Srinivasan, 2007). In some areas, indigenous people do not even have access to a reliable electricity supply (Dyson, 2007). In addition, high rates of poverty and low incomes make some indigenous EMs unable to afford communication tools and service fees. Lack of basic ICT infrastructure and devices remains the decisive barrier (Gordon et al., 2003). Moreover, there are some EMs whose particular lifestyles may further increase the difficulty in accessing fixed-line telephone and broadband, due to geographical isolation, spatial mobility and so on, such as Gypsy travelers in Britain (Weller, 2005), Saami herders in Sweden (Doria, Uden, & Pandey, 2009), and many nomadic tribes in Africa (Dyson, 2007).

2.1.3. Skill access

Many indigenous EMs still lack basic ICT skills (Gordon et al., 2003; Kamira, 2003). Poor education systems result in high illiteracy rates and low education levels, creating substantial barriers that prevent them from learning and using some advanced ICT applications (Haas, 2005). Their lack of ICT skills is also in part due to the language barrier, as many words from technology jargon are difficult to translate into minority languages, increasing EMs' difficulty in understanding and mastering sophisticated skills. This has been demonstrated by Kamira (2003), who found that Maoris were disproportionately concentrated in introductory IT programs rather than in more advanced classes. Another difficult issue is the insufficient number of native technical experts who can easily communicate with indigenous EMs and teach them skills (Hughes & Dallwitz, 2007).

2.1.4. Usage access

This factor can be analyzed in four ways: usage time; usage applications and diversity; broadband or narrowband use; and active or creative use (Van Dijk & Jan, 2006). Because of the limitations posed by the aforementioned three levels of access, most indigenous EMs fail to have an active and frequent access to diverse applications via high-speed broadband. On the other hand, from the service provider's perspective, there seem to be few applications or content that indigenous EMs need or that are suitable to them (Hughes & Dallwitz, 2007). For indigenous people, lack of ethnic and cultural relevance is the main shortcoming of existing information and services provided by both the public and private sectors (Srinivasan, 2007). Besides, the language barrier, again, hinders many indigenous people's access to various digital content and services, which also limits the scope of usage.

Overall, the issue of hindering indigenous EMs' access to ICT is a specialty in itself. Many sound and standards-based ICT practices used to support other disadvantaged groups become unworkable with regard to the delivery and provision of information services for indigenous EMs (Daly, 2009). There is a need for a social and environmental analysis