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Can information and communication technologies be pro-poor? ☆

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Abstract

There is over 20 years of accumulated cross-country evidence on the link between telecommunications provision and economic growth. Looking at micro-studies from a range of countries including Bangladesh, Botswana and Zimbabwe, there is also some evidence that provision of telephony has a dramatic effect on the income and quality of life of the rural poor. This paper examines cross-country evidence to discover if teledensity (the number of telephones per capita) has a pro-poor growth impact—fostering increased average incomes while reducing inequality. It also examines the impact of telecommunications rollout on quality of life variables including infant mortality and literacy. It finds that, historically, telecommunications rollout has had a positive and significant impact on *increasing* inequality and little impact on quality of life variables. A reason for this is tested and preliminarily confirmed that rollout has (historically) only benefited the wealthy. The paper will then turn to emerging evidence on the role of the Internet in poverty relief and statistics on the access gap in provision between rich and poor, suggesting that this new ICT will also be a force for income divergence. Using the results of the cross-country analysis on telecommunications, the paper will conclude with a discussion of potential policy responses (such as sector reform and universal access programs) to turn telecommunications from a source of growth that also increases inequality to a source of growth that diminishes it.

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1. Introduction

In 1876, Alexander Graham Bell was touting his new invention (the telephone) around America, and gave a presentation at the White House. There, President Rutherford Hayes turned to him and said “That’s an amazing invention, but who would ever want to use one?”

Despite Hayes’ skepticism, it has long been recognized that communications might have a central role in development. John Stuart Mill, writing in 1848, noted that “it is hardly possible to overrate the value, in this present low state of human improvement, of placing human beings in contact with persons dissimilar to themselves, and with modes of thought and action unlike those with which they are familiar ... Such communication has always been, and is peculiarly in the present age, one of the main sources of progress” (quoted in Hirschman, 1982).

Perhaps this is even more true today than in Mill’s ‘present age’. For many observers, the global economy is entering a ‘digital age’ and information has become a primary resource for economic development (Talero & Gaudette, 1996). At the same time, developing countries are increasingly alarmed at an emerging “digital divide”, in which those without access to the latest (and most expensive) tools and technologies will find themselves unable to compete in the global marketplace. For the poorest people in developing countries, this conjures a two-headed specter—living in a country that is being left behind because of generally low access to information technologies, and falling further behind the wealthy in their own country because they themselves have no access at all.¹

This paper focuses on evidence linking telecommunications rollout to broad-based development. It revisits past evidence on the link between telecommunications and economic growth before turning to less-studied areas—the impact of telecommunications rollout on within-country equality and quality of life. The paper turns to concluding sections on policy implications and what the discussion might mean for the Internet and development.

The results of the paper can be summarized as follows. The literature on a link between telecommunications and growth is extensive, and there is a reasonably strong consensus that telecommunications rollout does spur growth at least under some circumstances. There are also a range of micro-studies that suggest telecommunications access increases the poor’s income and access to services. At the same time, across countries, telecommunications rollout at a particular time appears to be quite strongly correlated with equality of income and quality of life measures at that time.

¹ Again, the two roles for ICTs as a force for convergence or divergence, depending on who has access, have long been clear. Looking first at limited access to communications making the rich richer, the strength of the Rothschild financial network in the 19th Century was founded on two things: contacts and communications. Along with bribing and beguiling most of Europe’s leading statesmen, the family operated its own system of couriers which, most famously, made Nathan Rothschild the first Londoner to hear of the news of Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo and this (at least in the popular imagination) allowed him to make a killing in the bond market. Conversely, broad-based access to technology was behind the rapid rise of the proletariat, according to Marx. In the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels argued that the “union of the workers ... is helped on by the improved means of communication that are created by Modern Industry, and that place the workers of different localities in contact with one another. It was just this contact that was needed to centralize the numerous local struggles, all of the same character, into one national struggle between classes. But every class struggle is a political struggle. And that union, to attain which the burghers of the Middle Ages, with their miserable highways, required centuries, the modern proletariat, thanks to railways, achieve in a few years”. (<http://www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/classics/manifesto.html>)

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