Strategies in Cybermissions

The purpose of this article is use broad-brush statistics to help us to do some first-order prioritization for Internet evangelism and Cybermissions. The assumption is that Internet evangelism is best used when: the harvest is plentiful, the conventional laborers are 'few', and yet Internet penetration is adequate. For the initial part of this article I have drawn extensively on research by my friend Chris Maynard, a British information manager and missions supporter.

The first question we need to ask is '*where is the Harvest Field, that is where are all the non-Christians*?'
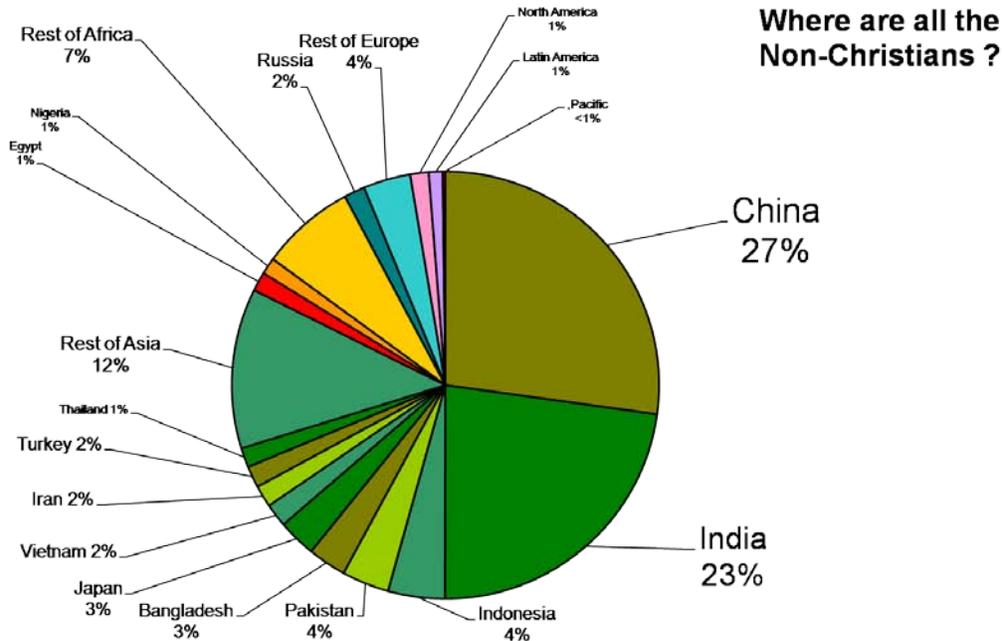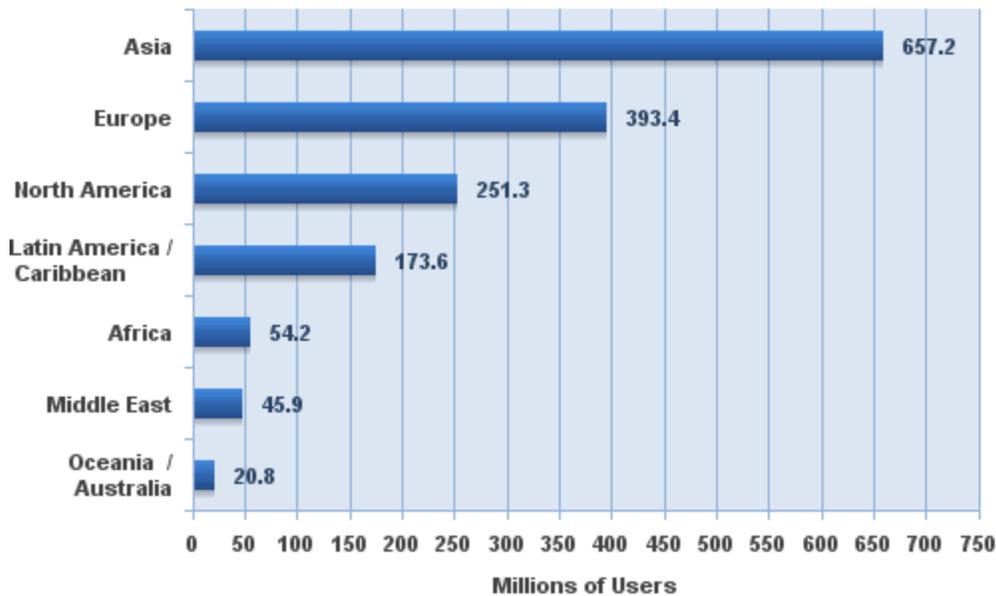
So we can see that 50% of the non-Christians are in just two nations – India and China. Both India and China have reasonable Internet connectivity in many of their urban areas. Other nations with large numbers of non-Christians and significant connectivity include: Indonesia, Pakistan, Japan, Turkey, and Thailand.

The second question we need to ask is:
 '*Where are all the Internet users and how do they overlap with the Harvest Field?*':
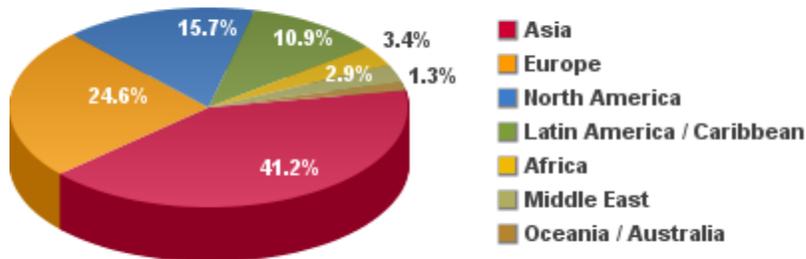
The following four diagrams are from Internet World Statistics website (www.**internetworldstats**.com *).*   They indicate significant and large numbers of Internet users in the key areas that we want to evangelize (such as China and India). They also indicate strong Internet penetration among areas where there are large numbers of evangelicals (such as the USA) who can become online workers in the harvest. For instance a Chinese-speaking American evangelical could go online to help evangelize China, or an Urdu-speaking Australian evangelical could go online to witness to Pakistan.

Internet Users in the World
by Geographic Regions

Region	Millions of Users
Asia	657.2
Europe	393.4
North America	251.3
Latin America / Caribbean	173.6
Africa	54.2
Middle East	45.9
Oceania / Australia	20.8

Millions of Users

World Internet Users
by World Regions

Region	Percentage
Asia	41.2%
Europe	24.6%
North America	15.7%
Latin America / Caribbean	10.9%
Africa	3.4%
Middle East	2.9%
Oceania / Australia	1.3%

Top 10 Languages in the Internet
millions of users

Language	Millions of Users
English	452
Chinese	321
Spanish	129
Japanese	94
French	73
Portuguese	73
German	65
Arabic	41
Russia	38
Korean	37
All the rest	258

Millions of Users
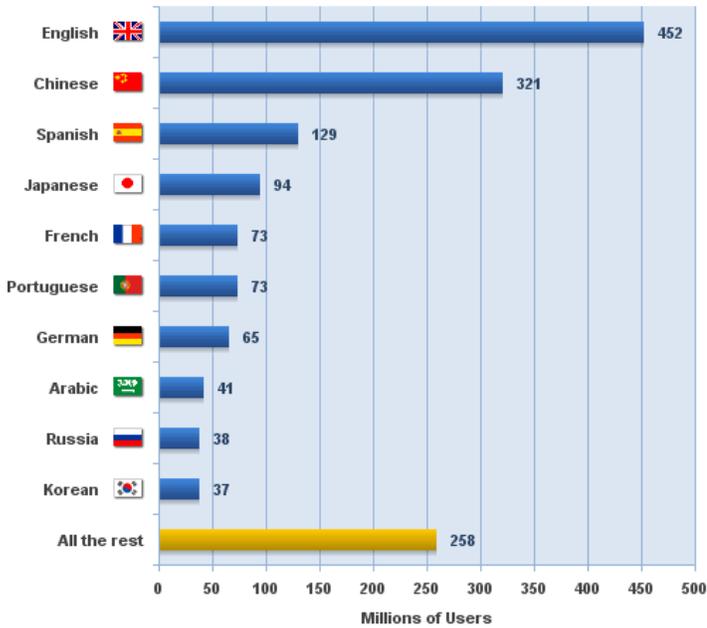
Source: Internet World Stats - www.internetworldstats.com/stats7.htm
Estimated Internet users is 1,581,571,589 for 2008
Copyright © 2009, Miniwatts Marketing Group

World Internet Penetration Rates
by Geographic Regions

Region	Penetration Rate
North America	74.4%
Oceania / Australia	60.4%
Europe	48.9%
Latin America / Caribbean	29.9%
Middle East	23.3%
Asia	17.4%
Africa	5.6%
World, Avg.	23.8%
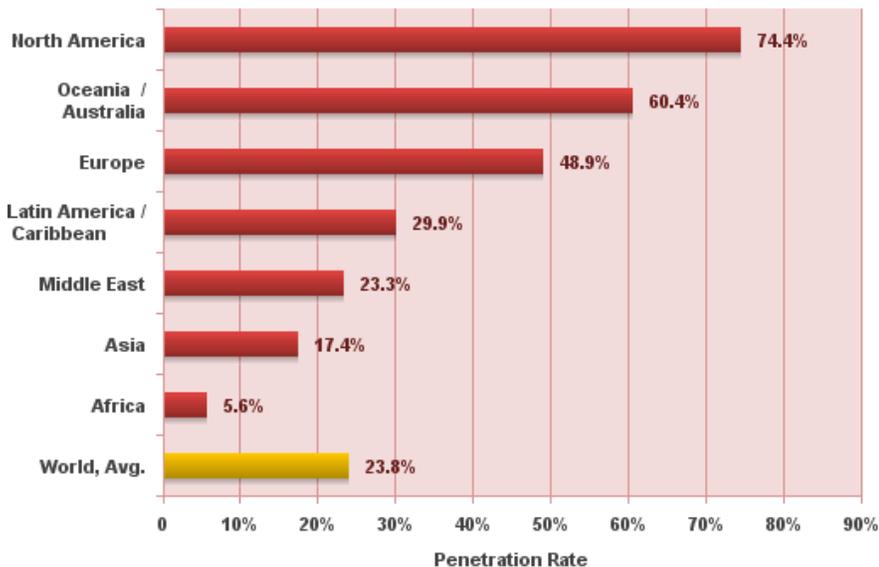
Penetration Rate

Source: Internet World Stats - www.internetworldststs.com/stats.htm
Penetration Rates are based on a world population of 6,710,029,070
and 1,596,270,108 estimated Internet users for March, 2009.
Copyright © 2009, Miniwatts Marketing Group

So we see a fairly high degree of overlap between where the non-Christians are and where the Internet is growing fastest. The next question must be – *where are all the laborers for the Harvest Field?* Where are all the Christians? And in particular do these laborers speak any of the Big Three languages of the Internet (English, Chinese and Spanish)?
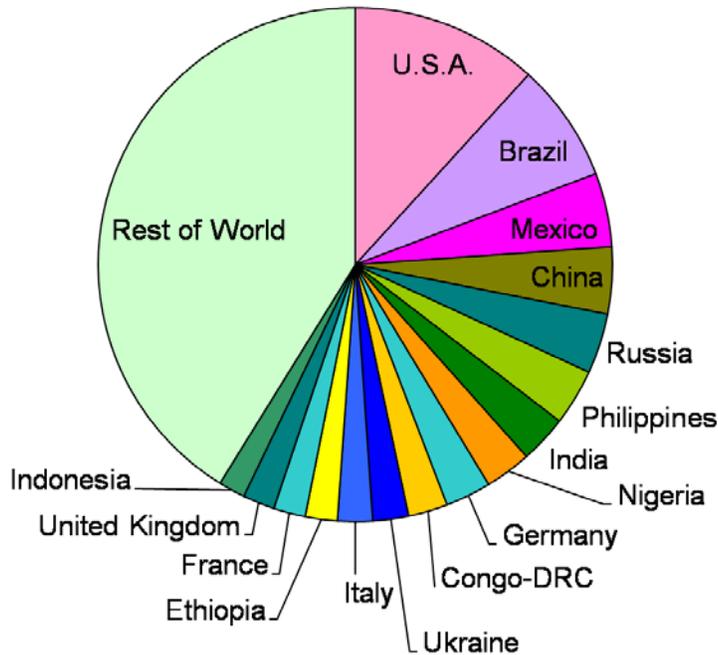
Where are all the Christians?

We see large numbers of laborers in the USA, Brazil, Mexico, China, Russia, the Philippines and India! So perhaps the Christians in China can use the Internet to reach other Chinese Christians; and the Indian Christians can use the Internet to reach India for Christ; and the Mexican evangelicals can use the Internet to reach the Latin world; and the Brazilian Christians can reach the Portuguese-speaking Internet; and the German Christians can use cyberspace to reach the German-speaking Internet and so on. Thus the strategy in many situations becomes: *training and enabling the national church in how to use the Internet to reach its own people, and also in how to reach unreached people groups who speak the same language (as that national church).*

Chris Maynard then took the data one step further by then asking – ***what are the priority harvest fields where the harvest are plentiful and the laborers are few.*** His next diagram is below:
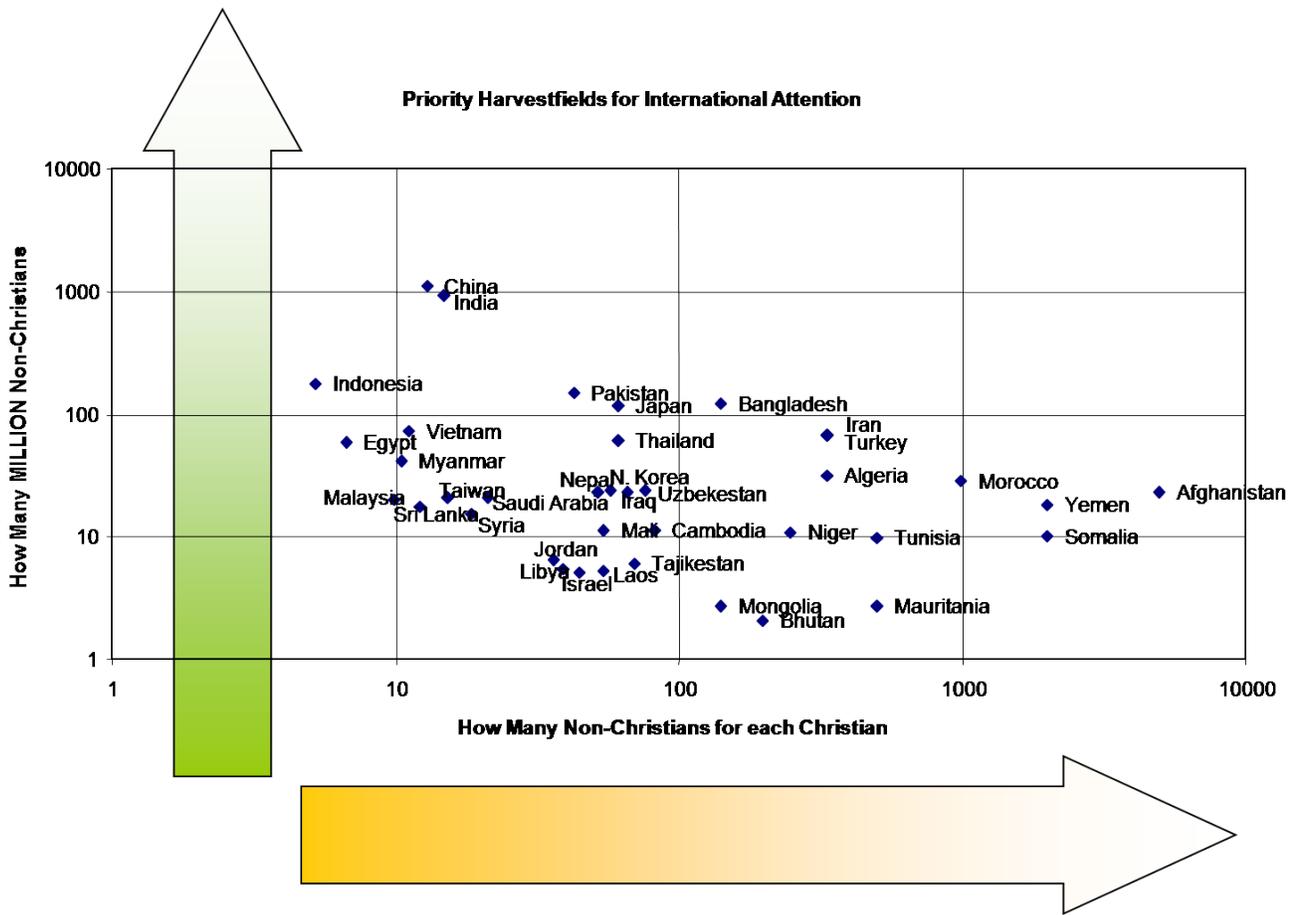
Priority Harvestfields for International Attention

Chart (logarithmic scales) — Y-axis: "How Many MILLION Non-Christians" (1 to 10000); X-axis: "How Many Non-Christians for each Christian" (1 to 10000)

Countries plotted: China, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Japan, Bangladesh, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar, Algeria, Morocco, Afghanistan, Yemen, Nepal, N. Korea, Uzbekestan, Malaysia, Taiwan, Sri Lanka, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Syria, Mali, Cambodia, Niger, Tunisia, Somalia, Jordan, Libya, Israel, Laos, Tajikestan, Mongolia, Bhutan, Mauritania

Diagram by Chris Maynard using data from Operation World 2000

Please note that the scales are *logarithmic!*

The 38 countries include: ALL six countries in the world with more than 100 million non-Christians
ALL 13 sizeable countries where there are more than a hundred non-Christians to every Christian. (Maldives and Comoros are the smaller ones not included) ALL 26 countries of the world where there are more than 10 million non-Christians AND more than 10 non-Christians to every Christian

All 38 countries are in the 10/40 Window, although not all countries in the window are on the chart. More than 80% of the non-Christians in the world are found in these 38 countries – which are less than 20% of countries.

The chart excludes for example: Russia with 64 Million non-Christians because there are more Christians than non-Christians (the harvest is plentiful, but there should be plenty of workers available) Palestinian Authority with 51 non-Christians to every Christian, because there are less than 4 Million non-Christians in total (the workers are few, but the harvest is relatively small)

(Note: the definition of Christian in Operation World is fairly generic and may not necessarily mean evangelical Christian)

The table below takes the 38 countries above, re-includes Russia (my personal decision in light of the low percentage of evangelicals there) and then *sorts them by Internet penetration and suitability for Internet evangelism*. The result is that we find *20 countries where the harvest is plentiful, the laborers are few, but they are suitable for Internet evangelism*. Internet figures are from March-April 2009 Internet World Statistics (broadband penetration) and from the ITU when up-to-date IWS statistics were not available.

Country	Internet Users	Penetration	Possible Strategies
Israel	5,263,146	74.00%	Messianic Jewish websites
Japan	94,000,000	73.80%	Manga, comics, technology bridge sites
Malaysia	15,868,000	62.80%	Malay, English languages, train Malaysian church in IE
Iran	23,000,000	34.90%	Farsi, websites, chat rooms, security conscious evangelism
Russia	38,000,000	27.00%	Addiction counseling
Saudi Arabia	6,380,000	22.70%	security conscious online evangelism, Skype, etc
China	298,000,000	22.40%	equip Chinese church to engage in IE
Turkey	21,000,000	21.10%	direct evangelism online
Taiwan	4,505,800	19.60%	Chinese language evangelism, dealing w. relationships, magic
Jordan	1,126,700	18.20%	Arabic, chat rooms, websites , Skype
Tunisia	1,765,430	17.00%	As above
Egypt	10,532,400	12.90%	As above
Thailand	8,473,000	12.60%	Thai, equip Thai church to witness online
Syria	2,132,000	10.80%	Arabic, chatr ooms, websites , Skype
Indonesia	25,000,000	10.50%	Equip Indonesian church to witness online
Algeria	3,500,000	10.40%	Arabic, chat rooms, websites , Skype
Mongolia	268,300	10.30%	Mongolian church is in revival, equip to witness online
Pakistan	17,500,000	10.10%	Encourage and strengthen Pakistani church leaders
India	81,000,000	7.10%	Train Indian Christians in online ministry
Uzbekistan	1,745,000	6.60%	Direct evangelism online
Bhutan	40,000	5.90%	Difficult, few online, rare language
Libya	260,000	4.20%	Security concerns
Sri Lanka	771,700	3.70%	Train Sri Lankan church to witness online
Afghanistan	500,000	1.50%	direct evangelism online
Laos	100,000	1.50%	Low percentage, Strict surveillance
Yemen	320,000	1.40%	Arabic, chat rooms, websites , Skype
Morocco	390,800	1.30%	Arabic, chat rooms, websites , Skype
Nepal	250,000	1.00%	Difficult, train Nepali church to witness online
Iraq	275,000	1.00%	Arabic, chat rooms, websites , Skype
Somalia	98,000	1.00%	Arabic, chat rooms, websites , Skype
Mauritania	30,000	1.00%	French-speaking, few Internet users
Mali	100,000	0.80%	French-speaking, few Internet users
Vietnam	516,600	0.60%	Equip Vietnamese Christians in USA to witness online
Cambodia	70,000	0.50%	Difficult, few users, maybe using French...
Bangladesh	500,000	0.30%	Low percentage but large number and they will be leaders
Niger	40,000	0.30%	French-speaking, few Internet users
Tajikestan	19,500	0.30%	Very small base of users
Myanmar	50,000	0.10%	Low percentage, Strict surveillance
North Korea	Data not available	0%	Inaccessible

Yellow = good for Internet evangelism, Brown = some challenges for IE, Red = difficult to impossible for IE

Conclusions So Far

So we see that there are 20 high-priority nations in the 10/40 Window, where Internet evangelism could be a very useful strategy: China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, Egypt, Thailand, Syria, Taiwan, Jordan, Malaysia, Tunisia, Algeria, Mongolia, and Israel. Most of these nations place total or partial restriction on conventional missionary activity among their ethnic majority (for instance Malaysia and Indonesia forbid conversion of Malays and proselytizing of Jews is forbidden in Israel) or they have strict 'anti-blasphemy laws' such as Iran & Pakistan. Japan, while permitting missionary activity has been a 'graveyard' for conventional missions. However it is open to Cybermissions see: www.internetevangelismday.com/japan-web-evangelism.php

These 20 countries contain respectively well over two-thirds of the world's non-Christians. Six major trade languages will be most useful in reaching these nations; English, Arabic, Russian, Chinese, Japanese and Bahasa Indonesia.

English language Internet evangelism will have some impact in Malaysia, Pakistan, India and Israel and to a lesser extent in Japan. Arabic language Internet evangelism will help reach Israeli Arabs, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Tunisia, Egypt , Syria and Algeria. Russian IE will reach Russia, Uzbekistan and Mongolia as well as Russian-speakers in the ex-Soviet Union. The Chinese language will reach China, Taiwan, and a significant percentage of Malaysia and Indonesia as well as the huge Chinese Diaspora. Bahasa Indonesia is spoken by 300 million Indonesians and is understood (in a slightly different dialect) across Malaysia. Japanese will reach the hundreds of millions of high-tech Japanese.

Finally French is a good candidate for a seventh language as it will reach French-speaking colonies in Africa (such as Mali) or in Asia (such as Vietnam) – most of these French speaking nations are in the 'marginal' IE list (marked in brown above)

Of course we will need a lot more than these seven major 'trade languages'! We will also need Farsi, Urdu, Hindi, Thai, Hebrew and Turkish at least. Most of these languages will require special characters known as Unicode or UTF-8; happily this is becoming increasingly easy these days.

Teams using these languages can be located anywhere in the world, e.g. here in Los Angeles. In fact most large churches would have people in the congregation who are fluent native speakers of these major languages and who are looking for an opportunity to engage in meaningful ministry of some sort.

Some Caveats

These statistics are 'at the 36,000 foot level' and do not go down to specific regional levels or to people group levels. And some significant realities are missed. For instance Afghanistan has a low average Internet penetration at 1.5%, possibly because of its geography. One would estimate that most of its 500,000 users would be in and around Kabul while very few users would be in Taliban-held areas. So Internet evangelism would not be a good strategy for reaching the Taliban! But it might be a great strategy for reaching residents of Kabul!

These statistics are also not exact. Where possible I have used the monthly reports used by Internet World Statistics which are generally based on Nielsen ratings of broadband penetration. Where such statistics have not been available I have used ITU (International Telecommunications Union) statistics for 'numbers of Internet users' in a country. In countries like Sri Lanka where Internet cafes are common, the broadband penetration might be low (it is only 3.7% in Sri Lanka) but the actual number of people who use Internet cafes may be many times that number. You would have to count the Sri Lankan users of email to guess at how many actual users there are.

Despite the above caveats a clear picture is beginning to emerge – that we have at least twenty nations that are high-priority (large harvest / few workers), and most of which place restrictions on conventional missionary activity – but which are open to Internet evangelism and Cybermissions.

The Mobile Platform To The Rescue

There are 16 highly strategic countries where the penetration of the 'landline Internet' is minimal (the ones highlighted in brown above: Bhutan, Libya, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Yemen, Morocco, Nepal, Iraq, Somali, Mauritania, Mali, Vietnam, Cambodia, Bangladesh, Niger, and Tajikistan

However digital media can still reach a large percentage of people in these nations via the cellphone, here are some statistics showing the growth of cellphone usage in Africa:

Figure 1: Africa – Mobile Subscribers and Penetration (2002-2012)
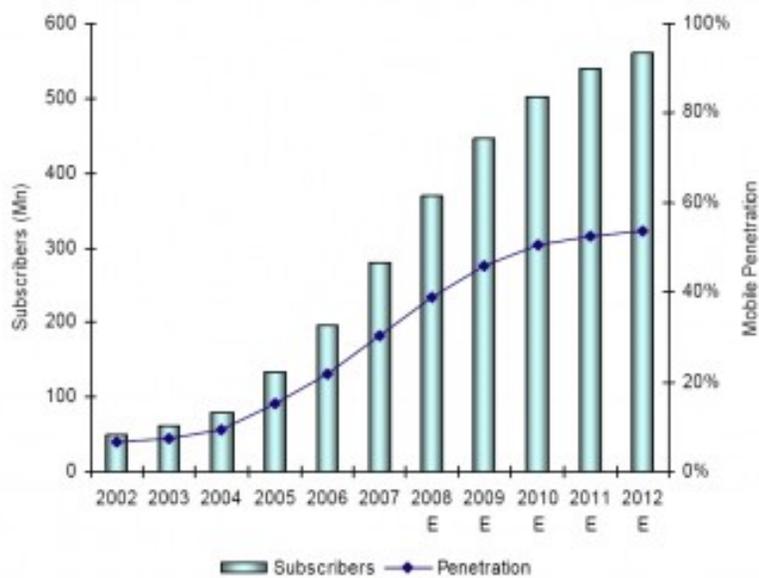
Source: Blycroft Ltd.

The Africa Mobile Fact Book 2008 says that 3G (mobile broadband) networks are becoming increasingly available, even in Africa and will constitute 18.6% of mobile phone subscribers by 2011. What is true in Africa is even more so in Asia – Hong Kong has a cellphone adoption rate of 163% and even Bangladesh is seeing a 67% year on year growth in cellphone adoption adding 34.3 million new subscribers in 2008!

Dave Hackett's mobile evangelism wiki: http://mobilev.pbworks.com/ has a good list of all the various approaches to using mobile phones for digital evaneglism including SMS messaging, short video clips, MP3 files, ebooks, mobile-friendly websites and so on. Tony Whittaker's Web Evangelism Day site also has a great section on mobile evaneglism at: www.internetevangelismday.com/mobile-outreach.php

The cellphone is also a highly persuasive and personal delivery platform and Profesor B.J. Fogg of Stanford's Persuasive Technology Laboratory has said that the mobile phone is the most persuasive of all current technologies and that we are more likely to read SMS messages than email or 'snail mail' (conventional mail via the letterbox). Given that the mobile phone is ubiquitous among those we are most trying to reach, and has a high potential for persuasion and influence of the culture, it should be among the first tools adopted by prospective digital evangelists.

Cellphones have some major hurdles though among them – small screen real estate, multiple incompatible operating systems, and the often painful task of converting pervious web content so that it works properly in the mobile world.

Netbooks

Then along came the netbook ! In particular the tablet PC /netbook combination is starting to take off globally and prices are dropping fast - from around $250 - $400, the price of a good cellphone.

The netbook is a basic affordable personal computer capable of web browsing, word-processing and basic office functions.

The netbook can access 3G networks with a plug in module, and has standard wireless and LAN connectivity. They do not have the processing power to run Vista and so tend to run either Linux or Windows XP.

Netbooks use the 'conventional Internet' which makes content delivery much easier than writing specific code for the multitudes of different mobile phone operating systems (iPhone, Google Android, Symbian (Nokia), Palm Os, RIM (Blackberry), Windows Mobile, and Linux) .

The following quote based on data from research firm IDC shows netbooks are rapidly invading the space for conventional laptops and mobile platforms:

In Q4 2008, 3.6 million units were sold which represents 20 percent of total laptop sales and 30 percent of consumer laptops sold during that period. In other words, the netbook market is worth nearly two third of the business laptop market in terms of units sold. Netbooks (or as IDC calls them mini notebooks) have been one of the most sought-after items in Christmas season last year and represented more than four fifths of the sales volumes in Western Europe.

My personal observation is that the netbook has taken off among middle-class Asians and that the two device model (netbook and cellphone) will be with us for some time. Netbooks also often come equipped with Linux which is the operating system of choice in some African nations.

It is too early to tell whether the netbook will be adopted at a fast enough rate to be a major platform for reaching the nations via digital evangelism. My guess is that unless cellphones get much easier to use (and to develop for) that people will vastly prefer to browse the web and do their work on a netbook than on even the coolest 3G cellphone.

Netbooks also have the potential to be a major educational tool (such as the One Laptop Per Child project) with a vast penetration of the youth market which is often the easiest to evangelize via media. Low-priced netbooks also increase the economic viability of Internet cafes, which are major point of information delivery in the developing world.

Between netbooks and 3G cellphones in Africa and Asia we will see a rapid growth in the numbers of people coming online between now and 2012. The Internet may well grow from the current 1.6 billion users to double in size to 3.2

billion users. *The world's unreached will finally be within reach of God's digital evangelists!* (For more on this please download the Edges of Cyberspace PowerPoint at: http://www.cybermissions.org/articles/index.html)

Convergence

There are some very interesting things happening in the convergence between radio and mobile platforms such as the possibility of a Digital Radio Mondial chip that would allow cellphones, netbooks , etc. to receive a wide range of digital radio frequencies including AM, FM, and short-wave. Thus major Christian short-wave broadcasters such as FEBC would see their programs being received on mobile ministry platforms across the globe!

Ethne To Ethne

We should not conceive of digital evangelism as solely being "West to rest'. Instead the Internet allows those with the gospel to share it to those (of the same language group) who do not have the gospel, anywhere in the world. We do not need Western Christians to evangelize China, the hundreds of millions Chinese Christians (both inside China and Chinese expatriates outside of China) can do so online. There are also many Arabic-speaking Christians who can help evangelize the Arab world and Turkish-speaking Christians who can help evangelize Turkey via digital media. In fact there in almost all cases there will be Christians of that language and cultural group, located somewhere in the world, who can be recruited to reach their own people for Jesus Christ.

Therefore the strategic task becomes defined as: ***mobilizing, equipping, networking, resourcing, and funding internet evangelists from every tribe and tongue and nation, to reach their own people in cyberspace – with an initial emphasis on the most strategic nations mentioned earlier.*** This analysis obviously does not preclude any leading from the Lord which may give a person or ministry a different task.

Different approaches (by churches and mission agencies engaged in Internet ministry) will be needed even amongst the most strategic nations. Some such as Afghanistan will require substantial direct evangelism from outside, in other cases the existing church may be equipped to carry out Internet evangelism (say in India), while in yet other cases where Internet evangelism is already underway by the national church we may just provide encouragement and prayer. Internet evangelism can be done 'on a shoestring' and the cost per interaction is low, often around 2c per life touched or 10c per indicated decision for Christ. It can even be done with an old computer out of a spare bedroom using open source software! The GUIDE Network is a valuable digital evangelism resource: www.internetevangelismday.com/guide-network.php

Additional Thoughts

To do the above one of the first steps is to raise-up full-time laborers for the digital harvest-field through having digital evangelism training modules in bible colleges and seminaries. We also need to overcome the apparent prejudice or non-engagement of many cross-cultural missions when it comes to digital evangelism so that these laborers can be deployed into digital evangelism departments within existing mission agencies. There is enormous potential for mission staff or ex/retired mission staff to do some form of digital evangelism including general social networking. No great computer skills are required and they will have the language, culture and experience that would make them optimally effective.

Digital evangelism does not have to be any more technical than sending an email or text message or posting a message online. All that is needed are basic word-processing and web surfing skills. Even using Facebook and its national equivalents can be a valid (and incarnational) form of witness.

Partnerships will be needed to develop the national in-country digital evangelists and the larger cyber-ministries such as Connaitredieu or TruthMedia should be able to come alongside newer players to offer experience, technical knowledge and backup, along with people able to give email counsel, mentoring, and follow-up on the ground.

To do this we need to overcome a limited and dated view of evangelism - that says that you just present the gospel online (the 4 Points, or whatever) - rather than using all sorts of culturally relevant 'bridge strategies' to drill down to where the non-seeking non-Christians are. There is a desperate need for highly contextualized online ministry.

Where To We Go To From Here?

We train the nations to reach the nations using digital evangelism, with an initial emphasis on the twenty countries and seven main trade languages mentioned earlier. We raise up the Chinese to reach China, the Indians to reach India, the Arab Christians to reach the Arab world and the Indonesian Christians to use computers and the Internet to facilitate the Great Commission among the islands of Indonesia.

We do so prayerfully and carefully, with proper regard to both the spiritual dimension and the need for proper cyber-security – because we are in an End Times battle zone in which our technology is only a tool and where the power is from God.

Finally we pay great attention to issues of contextualization so that the message is communicated with optimal relevance to each culture in cyberspace, without undue confusion. We move under the wise guidance of the Holy Spirit to reach the least reached with the gospel using computers, mobile phones, netbooks, radio and various forms of digital media – all for the glory of God!