

The Digital Lives of the Least-Reached

By Keith Williams

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Just over 20 years ago I arrived in the capital city of an Arab country where I was to do my language study. Few of my neighbours or co-workers had a computer, almost none had a phone (the process for getting a line took years – literally!) and international phone calls and internet connectivity were reserved for either the central post office or a small number of internet cafes.

Nine years later our team, located in a small desert town, started noticing that the Bedouin we worked with were no longer setting up their tents in the same locations they had done so for countless generations. Was there some major tribal conflict or a drought that caused this? No, they were starting to choose camp sites based on an entirely new life requirement. For countless centuries the main rationale for choosing one's encampment in that dry desert land had been access to water but now the main rationale for where to set up one's tent was access to cell phone signal! We started to call the central pole in Bedouin tents the phone pole as you would usually see a nail stuck into it and a small pouch containing the owner's phone hanging from it (hoping to catch enough signal at the highest point in the tent so the owner could carry on a conversation shouted up to it). Much to my surprise, a few years later I stumbled upon pictures of the interior of Mongolian *gers* (i.e. yurts) showing mobile phones hung in the same way, and I suspect that Mongolian nomads, too, were choosing their tent sites on the basis of cell phone reception.

Today almost every city dweller and desert nomad in the country, from teenage years on up, has at least one, if not two, mobile phones. And internet connectivity has become relatively inexpensive, fast and available to all who live within a certain radius of the main cities and highways. Youth in our dusty town now spend their days much like youth anywhere else – messaging, playing games, listening to tunes and watching videos on their phones.

How many of these changes are specific to this one country I used to live and work in? How much have the lives of other least-reached peoples on our planet been touched by the digital revolution that has exploded over the course of the past decade? These are a couple of the questions the Mobile Ministry Forum, a network of over 120 ministries, hoped to answer in putting together a digital atlas of 40 of the least-reached countries in the world. Having recently produced the *Digital*

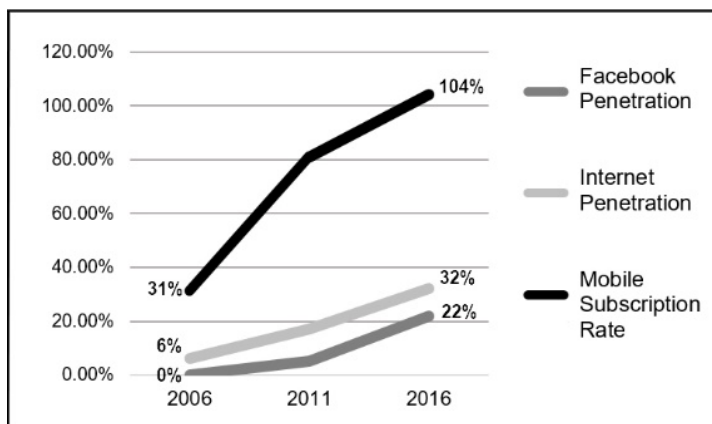
Ministry Atlas: The Digital Terrain in 40 of the Least Reached Countries,⁴ I'd like to share a few findings that I hope you will find helpful when considering digital and media ministry among least-reached peoples.

The world of the least-reached is changing rapidly!

Facebook was only released to the general public in September of 2006 and yet by June of 2017 the average Facebook penetration rate in 36 least-reached countries⁵ was nearly 25%.⁶ Internet usage in those same countries has exploded from only 4.3% of the population in 2005 to just under one-third of the population in 2016.⁷ Mobile phone line subscriptions similarly have skyrocketed from 30% to over 100% (many subscribers have more than one phone line).⁸

Changes in Media Penetration in 36 Least-Reached Countries

It's a mobile first world



⁴ <http://mobileministryforum.org/digital-terrain-in-40-of-the-least-reached-countries/>. For those who are interested in a country not covered by the atlas there is a research worksheet that can be used to gather most of the data for that country: <http://mobileministryforum.org/mobile-assessment-in-your-country/>.

⁵ For the sake of this article data from Israel, Japan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were excluded as their extremely high socio-economic status skewed the average results too greatly.

⁶ Compiled from the individual country Facebook penetration statistics provided by Internet World Stats: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/>.

⁷ Compiled from the individual countries' Internet penetration statistics provided by the U.N. International Telecommunications Union: http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/statistics/2017/Individuals_Internet_2000-2016.xls.

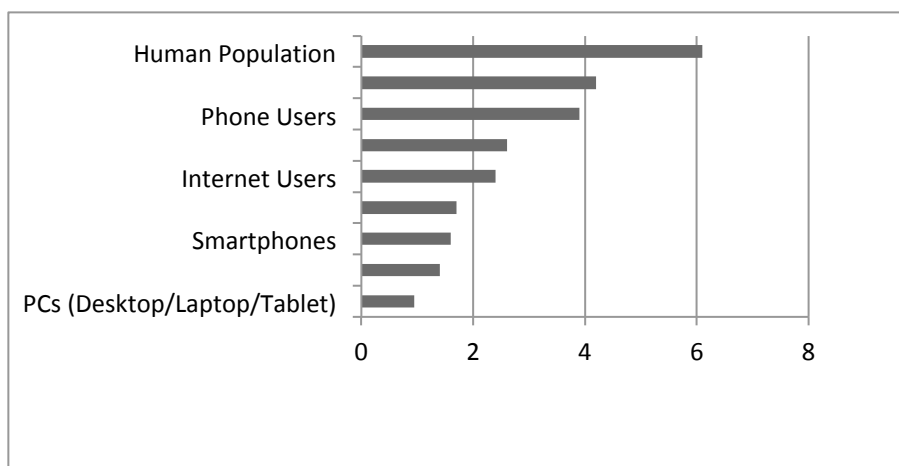
⁸ Compiled from the individual countries' mobile penetration statistics provided by the U.N. International Telecommunications Union: http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/statistics/2017/Mobile_cellular_2000-2016.xls.

for the least-reached

If there's any one media device you can expect to find in the hands and homes of least-reached peoples it is a mobile phone. Not only that, but when looking at how various media is consumed we find that nearly two-thirds of internet use in the 36 least-reached countries happens via mobile,⁹ while worldwide just under 94% of Facebook users are logging in on mobiles.¹⁰

Mobile ≠ Smartphone

With smartphones outselling other types of phones everywhere besides Africa (TomiAhonen Phone Book, p.109) it seems that they will become the predominant device among least-reached peoples in the next 5-10 years. That said, it will take that long or longer for them to account for over 50% of phones in use for some least-reached peoples. The installed base of phones in Africa is currently only 18% smartphone and it is only 32% smartphone for developing Asia (TomiAhonen Phone Book, p.42). Not a problem! There are a wealth of ministry opportunities



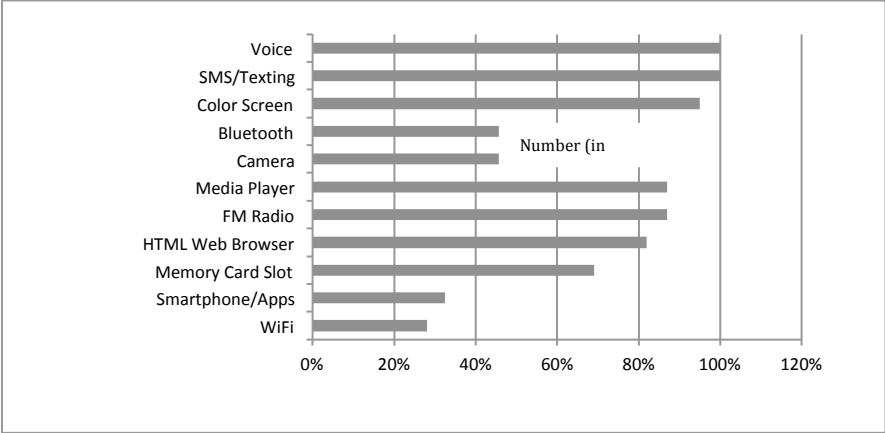
available

⁹ Tabulated using September 2017 country-specific data at Stat Counter Global Stats: <http://gs.statcounter.com/platform-market-share/desktop-mobile-tablet/algeria/#monthly-201610-201709> Algeria is the country chosen for this link but the country can be changed by the user.

¹⁰ Computed by dividing number of daily mobile Facebook users by total number of daily Facebook users: <https://www.theverge.com/2017/2/1/14474534/facebook-earnings-q4-fourth-quarter-2016> (accessed 10/9/2017).

Population & Media in the Emerging World¹¹

using mobile capabilities that work on anything from the dumbest dumbphone to the latest greatest smartphone and I highly recommend checking out the Mobile Ministry Made Easy Guide (available in eight languages) to learn more.¹² I would also point out that there are a good number of mobile ministry opportunities that do not require internet connection, which is helpful considering that 1.5 billion people in the emerging world have a phone but are not on the Internet (TomiAhonen Phone Book 2016, 150-164).¹³ Additionally, many who are on the Internet have still have difficulty accessing it due to either affordability or infrastructure issues.



Mobile Phones Capabilities in the Emerging World¹⁴

One other point related to smartphones: just because you and your friends and family have iPhones doesn't mean the least-reached do. Worldwide, Android makes up 81% of the smartphone market with iPhones taking most of the remainder.¹⁵

¹¹ TomiAhonen Phone Book 2016 and <http://communities-dominate.blogs.com/brands/2017/01/world-has-5.8-billion-mobile-phone-handsets-used-by-50-billion-unique-human-beings-out-of-7.4-billion-.html>.

¹² <http://mobileministryforum.org/mobile-ministry-made-easy/>.

¹³ The total number of Internet users in the emerging world (2.4 billion) was shared via personal correspondence with the author.

¹⁴ Source: TomiAhonen Phone Book 2016, p. 153 & 155.

¹⁵ Installed base of smartphones by operating system from 2015 to 2017 (in million units) <https://www.statista.com/statistics/385001/smartphone-worldwide-installed-base-operating-systems/>.

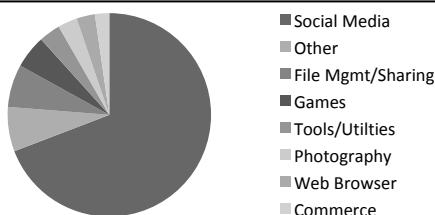
iPhones accounted for only 3.7% of all phones in the 36 least-reached countries researched for this article.¹⁶

Ministries need to get social

If ministries are going to be where the least-reached are digitally they need to be on social media whether it's Facebook, WeChat, SMS text messaging or some other social media channel/platform.¹⁷ In gathering and reviewing Android app download data for least-reached countries it became quite obvious that social media was the gorilla in the room.¹⁸ Categorizing the apps and scoring them for number of appearances in the top ten downloads as well as their rank per appearance showed that social media apps accounted for over 69% of top ten Android apps downloaded with file management/sharing and games apps coming in a very distant second and third.

Social media apps (Facebook, Messenger, WhatsApp) account for a huge percentage of the social media market as seen in the Google Play Store's daily listings of top ten app downloads. Group messaging apps like WhatsApp and SnapChat are rapidly rising in popularity and are more commonly used than traditional platforms like Facebook in many countries. A ministry's ability to adjust to this shift in platform preference will likely affect their success in social media ministry. Notice, also, the popularity of some relatively unknown apps (imo Messenger, SHAREit, etc.) that

**Android Apps Download Popularity
(July – Dec. 2016) Source: Digital Ministry Atlas**



¹⁶ Digital Ministry Atlas (calculation using data from the 36 individual countries) <http://mobileministryforum.org/digital-terrain-in-40-of-the-least-reached-countries/>

¹⁷ For more on the subject see Social Media for Missions: An Introductory Guide <http://mobileministryforum.org/social-media-for-missions-an-introductory-guide/>.

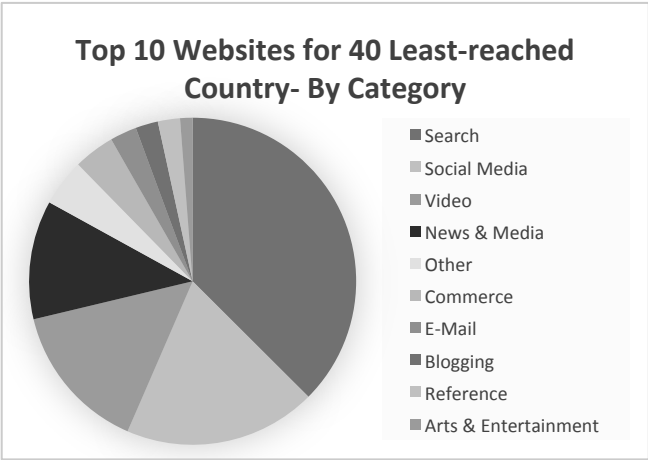
¹⁸ Daily listings of the top ten free app downloads from the Google Play Store were available via AppAnnie (<https://www.appannie.com/>) for 22 of the 40 countries listed in the Digital Ministry Atlas and daily listings were logged from July 1st until December 31st, 2016. For the 36 countries in this article there was download data available for 18 countries but the results for China were discarded due to the fact that the Google Play Store is blocked in China. Most Chinese users obtain their apps from alternative app stores like the Baidu app store. The fact that WeChat, one of the most popular messaging apps in the world with over 0.7 billion users (most in China), did not even appear in the Google Play Store listings reinforced the decision to discard the results for China.

ministries may want to investigate for their outreach potential.

Here are the most downloaded free Android apps in the least-reached countries (July-Dec. 2016):

- | | |
|-----------------------|------------------|
| 1. Facebook Messenger | 6. SHAREit |
| 2. WhatsApp | 7. Facebook Lite |
| 3. Facebook | 8. Viber |
| 4. imo Messenger | 9. LINE |
| 5. Instagram | 10. Snapchat |

The strong evidence for the importance of social media, separate from apps data, may be best seen in the fact that fully 81.4% of all Internet users in the 36 least-reached countries reviewed are Facebook users.¹⁹ Additionally, in gathering data on



the top ten websites for the atlas, the importance of social media was further borne out with a ranked and weighted tally showing that social media accounted for the second largest segment of top ten websites (see figure).²⁰

Source: Digital Ministry Atlas

¹⁹ Computed by dividing the percent of the countries’ populations found to be using Facebook by the percent of the countries’ populations found to be using the Internet. Facebook penetration statistics provided by Internet World Stats: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/> and internet penetration statistics provided by the U.N. International Telecommunications Union: https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/statistics/2016/Individuals_Internet_2000-2015.xls.

²⁰ Data on countries’ top ten websites was found via Alexa website rankings: <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries> or, if data wasn’t available for a particular country, via SimilarWeb rankings: <https://www.similarweb.com/country> (some countries are not listed on that page but can be found by searching for the country name on SimilarWeb).

As they search we can help them to find

Search strongly beat out social media as a website category in reviewing the top ten websites of 40 least-reached countries. Among the search websites, Google has an impressive lead with Yahoo also having a relatively strong showing. With search being such a major use of the Internet in least-reached countries and with the availability of advertising on search engine websites, ministries can learn how to more effectively use Google AdWords or Yahoo Gemini advertising as a means of connecting with and building bridges to their audience.

We live in a world where only 14% of Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and Tribal peoples personally know a single Christian.²¹ In the emerging world, 64% of the population— nearly every adult— has a mobile phone (TomiAhonen Phone Book, p.109) and thus an opportunity to connect with the Church. While there are many other facts and trends that could have or should have been presented here, I close praying that the Lord would give us the wisdom we need in this brave new world so that we could be as the people of Issachar ‘who understood the times and knew what Israel should do’ (1 Chron. 12:32).

²¹ Johnson, Todd M.; et al. ‘Christianity 2015: Religious Diversity and Personal Contact’. International Bulletin of Missionary Research, vol. 39, no. 1 pp 28-29.