

## The Cultural Geography of Cyberspace

The rapid growth of the Internet is of great cultural significance, for it has created the basis for a massive shift in patterns of social interaction, a seedbed for new forms of human consciousness, and a new medium for cultural change. Culture is fundamentally based on **communication**, and in cyberspace we have an entirely new form of communication; **uncensored**, multidirectional, written, visual, and aural.

At face value the Internet represents the leading edge of the **globalization** of culture. In broad terms the culture propagated by the Internet is very much core-oriented. The Internet portends a global culture based on English as the universal world language, with a heavy emphasis on core-area cultural values, such as novelty, spectacle, **fashionability**, material consumption, and leisure. It is unlikely, however, that the Internet will simply be a new medium through which core-area values and culture are spread.

To begin with, the impact of the Internet is likely to be highly uneven because of the digital divide (see Figure 2.23). Moreover, there is resistance in some places and regions to the cultural globalization associated with cyberspace. The French and French-Canadian authorities, already sensitive about the influence of English-language popular culture on their own, have actively sought ways to give **Francophone cybernauts access** to the Internet without submitting to English, the dominant language of Web sites. The French government has also subsidized an all-French alternative to the Internet: **Minitel**, an online **videotext** terminal that plugs into French telecommunication networks. A free Minitel terminal is available to anyone who stops by a France Telecom office.

In much of Asia the Internet's basic function as an information-exchange medium clashes with local cultures in which information is a closely guarded commodity. Whereas many U.S. World Wide Web sites feature lengthy government reports and scientific studies, as well as lively debates about government policy, comparable Asian sites typically offer little beyond public relations materials from government agencies and corporations. In puritanical Singapore, political leaders, worried that the Internet will undermine morality, have taken to reading private e-mail as part of an all-out effort to beat back the menace of online pornography. Chinese authorities fear that the Internet will foment political rebellion, so officials have limited access to ensure that the Chinese portion of the Internet can easily be severed from the world in the event of political unrest. The reluctance of major Asian organizations to put important information on their Web sites—along with the need for Westerners to use special software to read any local language documents that do exist—has resulted in a largely one-way flow of information, from America to Asia.

Nevertheless, the greatest potential of the **Internet** in terms of cultural change resides in the liberating and empowering potential of its vast **resource of** knowledge and information. By its very nature—a decentralized and complex web of computer hosts—the Internet empowers individuals (rather than **social** groups or institutions), allowing millions to say whatever they want to each other, free (for the first time in history) from state control. As such, it is an important vehicle for the spread of participatory **democracy to much of the world**.