

Subgroup on improving the measurement of Internet users 2020 progress report

Introduction

During the past EGH meetings it was agreed that there are new challenges in measuring the number of Internet users in a country. The rapid adoption of mobile phones has changed the landscape in many developing countries, which influences the reporting of Internet use. A considerable proportion of mobile phone users are reporting not having used Internet in the last three months when surveyed, despite having used messaging apps, social networks, and other services on their phones. This could impact estimates on the number of Internet users, while creating comparability issues between countries.

The consensus within the group was that users of Internet-dependent mobile apps should be counted as Internet users. Most countries dealing with this issue are implementing some strategy to count them as Internet users. This must be addressed considering two possible sources of this error: lack of awareness that applications are accessing the Internet; and use of zero-rating apps (whose Internet usage is subsidized and do not count against the user's data package).

Recommendations for surveys

The group decided on two possible recommendations for surveys, based on the possible extent of the ICT data on the survey vehicle. Typically, countries have either a standalone ICT survey or an ICT module on a household survey.

- For ICT modules on surveys that contain multiple themes, the suggestion is providing explanations for the respondent about what must be considered as Internet access. This allow for clarifications that could reduce the lack of awareness and direct zero-rating users to consider their applications as Internet use for the means of the survey, while adding no extra question and indicator to the questionnaire of the module. ICT modules will not often have room for extra questions, so the explanation at the beginning of the individual set of questions might help bring these users into the flow of the questions.
- For ICT standalone surveys, the suggestion is applying a follow-up question after the recommended question, inquiring about the most relevant types of applications used in the country. This follow examples provided by many participants of the subgroup that conduct this kind of strategy. Follow-up questions would improve the depth of information covered within the questionnaire and allow measurement of relevant services.

Model questions

Based on the recommended standard question for the indicator HH7 (Proportion of individuals using the Internet), we present some of the possible ways to implement the recommendations:

***Explanation:** Now we will talk about Internet use. The Internet is a technology that allows people to look for information and communicate. Apps such as WhatsApp or Google and services like applying for governmental emergency relief for the coronavirus are all examples of using the Internet.*

Explanations should be applied before the model question for the HH7 indicator and might improve its accuracy by bringing respondents who are not aware that such applications or services are considered Internet. It could also serve as orientation for those who consider their zero-rated apps usage as something different than the whole Internet.

***Follow-up question:** In the last 3 months, have you...*

Sent emails using apps such as Gmail or Hotmail? Y/N

Sent messages using apps such as WhatsApp or Telegram? Y/N

Looked for information using services such as Google or Bing? Y/N

Downloaded apps on a mobile phone? Y/N

Examples and items in the follow-up question might differ between countries or regions and need updating from time to time. In the example above, categories and examples were designed considering the context of Brazil. This follow-up question has been used for years and covers several possibilities of unaware or zero-rated Internet use. There is also a new relevant fact, which is the need for people to apply for emergency relief funds for the coronavirus exclusively online using a government app.

In different regions, it might be relevant to ask about different categories of app, such as social networks, specific e-government services (that are exclusively requested online), different examples of instant messaging apps, mobile money transferring services, and so on.

The use of locally relevant examples is highly recommended, as brand recognition might help respondents understand and relate to the question. While asking directly for specific apps might seem reasonable, it bears the risk of people mistaking a specific app for the whole category (especially relevant among illiterate respondents). It also increases the burden of updating the list of popular and relevant apps and services on a more frequent basis. Thus, it is recommended to ask for a group of similar services and provide more than one brand as example.

As explained above, the recommendation is for countries to implement one of the solutions, depending on how much room is available on the survey vehicle questionnaire. It might be possible to implement both solutions, but they are somewhat redundant and might make the theme too repetitive.