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Regional

Internet changing life in remote parts of Earth

Today we say that we live in a globalized world, one where everybody is connected to everybody else through social media and the Internet. Yet, we forget that there are still places so remote that communication is still a challenge.

One of those places is Mongolia, a relatively large country between Russia and China with a very sparse population. So how did a native of Mongolia wind up as the newest faculty member in the department of mass communications at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville? It is an interesting story.

Her name is Undrah Baasanjav and she was born in Ulaanbaatar, the capital and largest city in Mongolia. She obtained her bachelor's in computer systems from Novosibirsk State Technical University in Russia, her master's in telecommunications and her doctorate in mass communication, both from Ohio University. When asked if the fact that she was born in a country with such a sparse population was her motivation to study mass communication, she was unequivocal.

"Exactly," she said. "You are hitting the center of my interest in communication. It's a very sparse population and communication is key. Mongolia is a very far distance from America. If you drilled down all the way through the earth you would probably end up in Mongolia." In Mongolia, she explained, people have to travel days to get anywhere.

"It was interesting when the Internet came in and shortened the distance. It thrilled me and that is why I got interested in communication networks and communication systems and satellite communication," she said, adding that the Internet was introduced to Mongolia in 1997.

"I precisely remember that was when the whole country had 64k bandwidth and we used to collect all of the emails in the country via satellite," she said. "The whole country would collect the emails and then send them out once a day. It was a fascinating experience. I remember very clearly waiting for a minute for a Netscape login to download."

Mongolia has gone through a number of transformations. At one point it was under the shadow of the Soviet Union. After the



Dr. Undrah Baasanjav lecturing at SIUE.

Soviet Union collapsed it became much more independent and adopted a number of market reforms. To what extent has the Internet helped in transforming Mongolian society?

"When I was in Mongolia I worked on several projects that were trying to bring in Internet communication technology and to increase the transparency and free flow of information in the country," Baasanjav said. Now Mongolia has adopted market and democratic reforms.

"Those types of transitions changed a lot of the society and the culture," she added. "To a certain extent the communication helps the people in Mongolia to have opportunities and become more integrated with other societies. And the Internet has been very well integrated into society. Even people in the countryside have the Internet."

Being sandwiched between Russia and China – two countries that keep tight reins on the Internet – makes Mongolia unique to

the region.

"Compared to our neighbors, Mongolia is a relatively open country," she said. "The Mongolian government tries to stick to the open democracy more consistently. Compared to its neighbors Mongolia is a relatively new country, and one of the founding cornerstones of democracy is the free flow of information."

Baasanjav said that this flow of information is facilitated through the Internet, where people can read about different types of ide-

Aldemaro Romero Jr. College Talk

ologies or different developments throughout the world.

Another area in which Baasanjav works is web design, and she has definite opinions of what makes for an effective design.

"First of all, when I teach the course to the students we start with the basics," she said. "Think about your audience. What is the purpose of your Web site? Who are you communicating with? So if you are communicating with young children you will want to design with different colors, some shiny and bright colors. If you are targeting the elderly you will want to make the font type bigger." For her, the best Web sites are the ones that meet a purpose. "If you are designing for a mobile phone then it has to be a mobile phone design."

Another area of her research is the Internet and national identity, which is interesting given that the Internet is a global phenomenon.

"The Internet allows people dispersed around the world to get together and have certain kinds of identities," she said. "Diasporas are very big on the Internet. So many people who are sort of thrown into a different part of the world still keep together and communicate with each other, and they have the newspapers and social networks. They are kind of still tied to their own kind of background identities." Yet, she explained that the language of the Internet must in many ways transcend cultures.

"The Internet has to be standardized for everyone to communicate," she said. "It must have a kind of linguistic uniformity where you have to follow certain standards and it has to be captured in a certain way and it has to be communicated a certain way."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Sciences@siue.edu.

Photo by Michael Nathe