



# Internet Information Not Reaching Non-English Users, Prof Finds

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A first-ever study examining the language used to search the Internet has found web surfers across the globe are unable to access a majority of the information online because they aren't searching in English.

About 70 per cent of the information published on the World Wide Web is in English, but U of G plant agriculture professor Manish Raizada, who led the study in partnership with Google, found an overwhelming number of people search the Internet in their national language rather than English.

Even in English-speaking countries, Raizada found a significant percentage of immigrant groups worldwide are searching the Internet in their native language, rather than the language of their adopted nation.

Raizada focused his research on information published online by food- and health-related institutions across the globe because the Internet is a main source of information on these topics. Reports show that a majority of people regularly use the Internet to obtain medical information, and Google searches have even been shown to help physicians in correctly diagnosing medical ailments, he said.

His research findings, which were recently published in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, the world's leading eHealth journal, are particularly worrisome when it comes to accessing information on pandemic diseases, outbreaks and famines, said Raizada.

"In emergencies like an avian flu outbreak or a pandemic disease or famine, you want to get information out quickly and accurately, but right now global organizations aren't reaching people directly. Agencies are putting information online, but the 700 million non-English-speaking Internet users can't access it."

Raizada and a research team used Google's global database to determine search patterns across multiple languages in 227 countries.

As part of the study, they measured the search patterns of four terms: avian flu, tuberculosis, schizophrenia and maize (corn). For the term avian flu, just one per cent of searches in non-English countries were in English, and for the terms tuberculosis and schizophrenia, between four and 40 per cent of searches in non-English countries were in English, said Raizada. As for the term maize (corn), indigenous languages are used in Internet searches in Latin America rather than English or Spanish, he said.

The team also found that 80 to 90 per cent of food- and health-related institutions don't translate their websites into multiple languages, including information related to crisis situations.

Raizada worked on this study with David Wilson, a technician in the Department of Psychology;

undergraduate student Carly Wight; Punam Mony Singh of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto; and Google lab scientists Olcan Sercinoglu and Artem Boytsov.

Since the completion of the study, Google has launched a software program that attempts to translate search queries across 10 major languages.

"This is a wonderful first step," Raizada said. "I hope these efforts will continue to grow, both at Google and at other search engines. But the major problem still remains that institutions aren't translating their web content."

He said there's a need for food and health website translation that targets not only the world's major languages but also linguistic minorities within nations, including immigrants, foreign-aid workers and indigenous groups. This applies to both global and domestic agencies, he said.

"Up until this point, it's been a problem that hasn't been talked about. It's important that agencies realize that if they want to reach a population, they have to invest in translating the information."

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