Cellular Usage Around the World

It is fascinating how cellular usage varies around the world. I've written before about the huge impact of cellular in emerging economies, enabling communications, overcoming problems of lack of infrastructure (bad roads, no post service, no banks) and how that drives economic growth and improves lives.
While hardly emerging economies, this week's Economist has an article on wireless broadband in the BRIC countries: bringing internet to areas in countries that are reasonably well-off but often under-served by copper for DSL or cable. In some cases, these countries will leapfrog those in the west.

But even amongst rich countries there are intriguing differences. Coverage in the USA is notoriously bad (locals may moan or may not notice, but visitors are astonished: "Just how is it possible that a cellphone drops out while driving down 101 in Silicon Valley?" a friend asked me, in amazement...).

But in Europe, or even more so in Asia that is an utterly alien concept. Cellphones "just work". The idea of somewhere developed where a cellphone didn't work would be as odd as a house in Manhatten that didn't have electricity.

But, of course, these places have their own problems: specifically network capacity. The iPhone is a global phenomenon. In most countries 'tethering' is perfectly natural and supported (indeed, it seems odd that it is so hard in USA), while data dongles are astonishingly aggressively priced: in UK you can get one with 1GB/month for just £5 ($8), for 15GB for £125 ($22). No surprise network capacity is an issue: DoCoMo reported more than 90% of their traffic is data!

That is why many are rushing to use the new technologies: In Korea WiBRO (local name for WiMAX) was launched three years ago, and KDDI has a subsidiary offering it in Japan - but all operators are moving to LTE quickly too. Korea Telecom is rolling out a Wi-Fi network for its cellular subscribers, while rival SKT has launched a public access data only femtocell service ("data is the problem; we don;t need to worry about voice coverage").

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