

Closing the Digital Divide and its Impact on Minorities

Michael Boone

Research Assistant

Department of Psychology, Counseling, and Special Education
Texas A&M University-Commerce
Commerce, TX

M. LaVelle Hendricks, EdD

Associate Professor of Counseling

Department of Psychology, Counseling, and Special Education
College of Education and Human Services
Commerce, TX

Rusty Waller, PhD

Associate Professor

Director of the Teaching and Learning Center
American University of Ras Al Khaimah
Ras Al Khaimah, UAE

Abstract

Many scholars believe that the digital divide is closing, and in some ways it appears it is. But successes reveal that the issues involved in closing the digital divide are more complex than what appears on the surface. This article will briefly look at the following three areas: computer access, internet access, and access through cell phones, in order to understand the impact of efforts to close the digital divide. It will also look at the societal impact of the digital divide.

Keywords: minorities, digital divide, closing

Introduction

There is an area of concern that impacts thousands of households in America. It hits home every day in the life countless families who either have limited access and/or education concerning computer technology and its benefits, plus life changes that are derived from it. It is called the digital divide. Selkin describes the digital divide as consumer disparities in access to information and communication technologies based on age, gender, race and socio-economic characteristics and geographic location (2010, p 101). Over the past 30 years there has been a large amount of money spent to close this gap as public and private programs have focused on the problem. As an example, one of the largest programs, E-rate, provides discounts to schools and libraries to compensate for the costs of telecommunications services and equipment based on economic need and location (Fairlie, 2007, p. 267).

The digital divide focuses on the difference between those who can, and cannot, effectively use computers and the Internet for communication and information (Rochet, 2007). There is much talk about how the digital divide gap has been closing as African Americans, minorities and the poor acquire access to computer technology and the internet. But the complexity of the problem is not easy to solve. In simple terms, the issues surrounding the digital divide concern lack of computers, lack of experience with computer technology, and lack of broadband access to the internet, but the discussion can also blossom into complex topics such as the capacity of computing devices, pricing systems for online access, in addition to a plethora of other topics (Horton, 2004; Rochet, 2007). In this paper we are going to explore the area of computer, internet, and smartphone access as it relates to the digital divide in order to see if the gap is closing.

Computer Access

In 1984, only 4.4 percent of blacks and 4.1 percent of Latinos had home computers, whereas 10.0 percent of whites and those of other races had access to home computers. By 2003, the percent of White adults (ages 18+) with home computer home were: 71.5%, versus Blacks at 49.6%, and Latinos at 46.7%. The percent of white children (ages 5–17) who had home computers were 87.0% versus Black at 55.1%, and Latino at 56.3% (Fairlie, 2007, p. 269 - 270). Also white computer owners appear to have more computers at home on average than do blacks and Latinos, 33.2 percent have 2 or more home computers excluding old computers that are not used, contrasted with, 22.1 and 21.3 percent of black and Latino computer owners who have 2 or more home computers (Fairlie, 2007, p. 276). Another important factor is the quality of the computer (old versus new, fast versus slow) to use the home computer for meaningful work, especially internet use (Fairlie, 2007).

Internet Access

Another topic in the digital divide discussion is the lack of internet access or use by blacks and Latinos. In a 2003 report, Fairlie reports that the numbers for internet use for adults (ages 18+): White 64.3%, Black 40.0%, Latino 37.3%; and for children (ages 5–17): White 79.1%, Black 42.3%, Latino 42.5% (2007, p. 269). Fairlie reports that both blacks and Latinos are less likely to use computers and the Internet than whites even conditioning on having home

access with roughly 70 percent of black adults making use of a home computer, and 80 percent of black adults who have home internet use it home (2007, p. 271). For every reported income category, blacks and Latinos are substantially less likely to have a home computer and Internet access; and roughly one third of blacks and Latinos who do not have Internet access report that cost is the main reason that they do not use the Internet at home (Fairlie, 2007). Horton suggesting that the reasons for minimum use is exposure, cost, and content, says that if individuals can't perceive the importance of an object or how it could affect their lives, they will not go out of their way to try to learn to use it, or excel at its application (2004, p. 17, 20).

Access through Cell Phones

Modarres mentioning a 2010 Pew Research Center illustrated that “Latinos and African Americans were more likely to use their cell phones to access the Internet, e-mail, and Facebook than the white population (2011, p. 6).” Also Pew another report, *Smartphone Adoption and Usage*, notes that roughly 30 percent of smartphone owners who go online primarily via their phones lack home internet access (Yelton, 2012, p. 7). With the rise of smartphones, there are scholars who are now writing about the eventual digital divide disappearance, due to a person's ability to connect with the Internet using smartphones, thereby bypassing laptops and home computers (Modarres, 2011, p. 5). But the problem is that cell phone Internet access is good for social networking and entertainment but is bad for other forms of internet use, especially filling out government forms, accessing online documents, or transacts business, and reading local news (Yelton, 2012, p. 8). Modarres citing Pew research says that smartphones are not equal substitutes for access and full engagement with the digital world (2011, p. 6).

Societal Impact of the Digital Divide

Why does it matter if people have computer technology and access to the internet? Government, education, social work, private foundations, industry experts, along with the popular press, plus parents and youths say that lack of computers and internet access mean can bring forth harm critical areas such as educational advantages, future employment and earnings, opportunities for social and civic involvement, and equity and civil rights issues. (Drucker, 2006; Eamon, 2004; Fairlie, 2007). In addition, an increasingly amount of information about the health care experience is now found on the internet. The Internet is now an important part of health care experience for many Americans. “Management of most chronic medical conditions involves self care on an outpatient basis. This requires patients to be knowledgeable about how to provide best personal care. Internet facilitates this ownership of power (information) and facilitates health care management skills” (Seçkin, 2010, p. 100).

For the rest of society, the digital divide is important because the lack of a solution to this issue can lead to long-term social, political, and economic cost to all of us (Rochet, 2007, p 40). We are facing a future in which the numbers of European Americans are shrinking, and where minorities will become a majority of the population. Many of these minorities, such as African Americans and Latinos, will comprise a good part of the workforce of tomorrow. If they are on the losing end of the digital divide, it can affect the economic health of our nation, and possibly impact America's competitiveness in the world.

Another area that can be affected is the political scene. Because many political entities have moved to online research and fundraising to define their political identities, the lack of minorities represented in these online surveys due to lack of minority and poor engagement in online activities can sort of give a “false positive” to viewpoints of political entities (Rochet, 2007, p 45). This can lead to a repeat of the 2012 presidential campaign in which one political entity believed they had the hearts and minds of the voting population partly because of their online activities, only to find out that they had sidelined a whole area of the population. An additional society can be affected is through the false perceptions of the commercial buying market. Many companies are buying into to online marketing to save money (Rochet, 2007, p 46). “If consumers are largely influencing each other’s buying patterns through these online communities, and market research companies such as Nielsen/NetRatings are leveraging that information to the benefit of their clients, then the effectiveness of that information is most likely limited to consumers with Web access” (Rochet, 2007, p 46).

Results and Discussion

This paper briefly looked at the following three areas: computer access, internet access, and access through cell phones, as it relates to closing the digital divide. What was discovered was that in each of the areas there were successes, but the successes unveiled more complex issues than how the original premise began. The paper also looked at the societal impact of the digital divide, and discovered that it is a critical issue that affects all of our lives. As American we win together and we lose together, and what impacts one part of our society affects us all. Many scholars believe that the digital divide is closing, and in some ways it appears it is. But this issue is complex and requires further study.

References

- Banister, S., & Fischer, J. (2010). Overcoming the Digital Divide: The Story of an Urban Middle School. *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*, 23(2), 2-9.
- Chakraborty, J., & Bosman, M. (2005). Measuring the Digital Divide in the United States: Race, Income, and Personal Computer Ownership. *Professional Geographer*, 57(3), 395-410. doi:10.1111/j.0033-0124.2005.00486.x
- Drucker, M. J. (2006). Commentary: Crossing the Digital Divide: How Race, Class, and Culture Matter. *Contemporary Issues In Technology & Teacher Education*, 6(1), 43-45.
- Eamon, M. (2004). Digital Divide in Computer Access and Use Between Poor and Non-Poor Youth. *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*, 31(2), 91-112.
- Fairlie, R. (2007). Explaining differences in access to home computers and the Internet: A comparison of Latino groups to other ethnic and racial groups. *Electronic Commerce Research*, 7(3/4), 265-291. doi:10.1007/s10660-007-9006-5
- Horton, J. (2004). Is the Serpent Eating Its Tail? The Digital Divide and African Americans. *Journal of Technology Studies*, 30(4), 17-25.
- Jha, A. K., Bates, D. W., Jenter, C., Orav, E., Jie, Z., Cleary, P., & Simon, S. R. (2009). Electronic health records: Use, barriers and satisfaction among physicians who care for black and Hispanic patients. *Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice*, 15(1), 158-163. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2753.2008.00975.x
- London, R. A., Pastor, M., Servon, L. J., Rosner, R., & Wallace, A. (2010). The Role of Community Technology Centers in Promoting Youth Development. *Youth & Society*, 42(2), 199-228. doi:10.1177/0044118X09351278
- Mesch, G. S. (2012). Minority Status and the Use of Computer-Mediated Communication: A Test of the Social Diversification Hypothesis. *Communication Research*, 39(3), 317-337. doi:10.1177/0093650211398865
- Modarres, A. (2011). Beyond the digital divide. *National Civic Review*, 100(3), 4-7. doi:10.1002/ncr.20069
- Mossberger, K. (2006). Race, Place, and Information Technology. *Urban Affairs Review*, 41(5), 583.
- Payton, F. C. (2003). Rethinking the Digital Divide. *Communications of the ACM*, Vol. 46. No. 6, 89 -91.
- Prieger, J. E. (2003). The Supply Side of the Digital Divide: Is there Equal Availability in the Broadband Internet Access Market?. *Economic Inquiry*, 41(2), 346-363.
- Rochet, L. R. (2007). The "Data Slant": Why Lack of Media Generated by Minority Users Online Is an Offline Problem. *Harvard Journal of Hispanic Policy*, 1939-51.
- Scanlan, M. A. (2008). E-Commerce, Race, and the Digital Divide. *Review of Business Research*, 8(4), 134-145.
- Seçkin, G. (2010). Digital Diversity or Digital Divide: An Exploratory Research on Age, Gender, Race and Income Characteristics of Online Health Information Users. *International Journal of Diversity in Organisations, Communities & Nations*, 10(1), 99-116.
- Vigna, D. C., Fairchild, P. J., & Bearnese, K. J. (2003). 4-H Cyber Fair: Bridging the Digital Divide. *Journal of Family & Consumer Sciences*, 95(4), 34-37.
- Wilson, K., Wallin, J., & Reiser, C. (n.d). Social stratification and the Digital Divide. *Social Science Computer Review*, 21(2), 133-143.

Yelton, A. (2012). Who Are Smartphone Users?. *Library Technology Reports*, Vol. 48, No. 1, 5-8.