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Florida Digital Divide

“Bringing Digital Access To Florida’s Minority Communities”

FMCRC Position Paper

By

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Florida's Digital Divide

Introduction

From the moment that information technology became an integral aspect of life, the digital divide was destined to follow. While initially referring to the gap between those who do and who do not have access to computers, the term has increasingly expanded in definition. As more and more people have obtained access to computers, either at home or elsewhere, it has become increasingly evident that access alone is not enough. Likewise, as the Internet has continued to infiltrate into our daily lives, new gaps have formed. The digital divide must end. It is not just the poor and racial minorities that suffer the consequences of being unconnected. While these population segments most often bear the brunt of the burden, this problem impacts our entire society. The government, corporations, and non-governmental organizations must come together in order to bridge this gap and usher in digital equality.

A Bit of History

The issue of the digital divide, the division between those who do and do not have access to computers, the Internet, and other information technology, first came to the forefront in the second half of the previous decade. Discussions regarding the Telecommunications Act of 1996 instigated the argument over whose responsibility it was to deliver Internet service to the poor. The public sector felt it was the responsibility of the private sector. The private sector believed the opposite to be correct. Knowing what we know today, both were right. The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) continued to publish reports illustrating the divide. At first, the government concentrated on the technology gaps. As more data were collected, acute observers began to realize that there were more to factors regarding the issue than simply who does or does not own a computer or a connection to the Internet. Not surprising, some failed to understand that there was a problem to be resolved. Federal Communications Commissioner (FCC) Chairman Michael Powell declared, "I think there's a Mercedes Benz divide, I'd like one, but I can't afford it" (Cooper 3). The digital divide was declared dead. The "free market" would solve everything. Fast forward to 2008, the digital divide exists.

While the largest divide undoubtedly lies between the first and third worlds, the United States has not managed to fill in its own ditch. While progress has certainly been made, much remains to be done before the land is leveled. Two of these areas that continue to persist in the United States are those along class and racial divides. In a country continually moving toward an information society, it is vital that no group be left behind.

Regrettably, there have been setbacks in the road to progress during the past few years, such as the period in which Florida's Digital Divide Council was made inactive after its resident department lost funding (Baker). The struggle against this inequality must continue. Florida residents along with people of the U.S, and the world who are currently disenfranchised must get assistance so that they too can transition into the digital age. Moreover, we must ensure that not only are they living in the digital age, but

that they are also surviving. To that end it is necessary to look beyond simple access towards digital literacy. Everyone must, not only have access to technology but also have a basic understanding of how it works and how to use it efficiently.

Short-Sighted Solutions

There are numerous reasons why one might suggest that there is no digital divide within the United States or why it is simply not a pressing issue. One of the most obvious suggestions is that the entire issue, or at least the alleged severity, is simply a government or liberal invention. Some who hold this viewpoint suggest that “it is nothing more than a scam to open up another door for federal intrusion and expansion” (Green). This suggests that the gap has been fabricated in order to increase government power and to unfairly tax citizens. He goes on to state that “the real answer to the so-called digital divide is simple moral and economic responsibility” (Green). This implies that he is not actually totally dismissing the divide, but believes that the burden of rectifying the situation should fall upon the individual rather than be solved by the government, tax payers, or businesses. And if this were merely an issue of access, then he might be correct.

A similar voice, Melissa Wiedbrauk, suggests that “all of the things liberals want the government to provide are already being addressed by natural forces of the free market”. She illustrates this point by noting that as new technology is developed, computers become increasingly affordable. She also suggests that libraries provide a reasonable alternative for those who cannot afford even relatively cheap computers and Internet access (Wiedbrauk). Indeed, between October 1997 and October 2003, the percentage of U.S. households with computers grew from 36.6% to 61.8% (NTIA 8). While downplaying the importance of Internet access, these views also ignore the importance of understanding how to use the technology. To this, Wiedbrauk replies that instruction is easily obtained on the Web and that “the Internet is user-friendly enough for children these days”. However, such a simple solution misses a number of factors. First, the user must know where to look for those resources and have the time to peruse them, a lot less likely if he/she only has access via the local library. Furthermore, both the library’s hours and time restrictions on the computers limit the user. Second, some people are not visual learners and therefore have difficulty learning from a book, even if that book is online. Third, there is a false assumption that adults possess at least an equal propensity for learning new concepts as children. Thus, even if people have access to the technology, there is still a divide for those who cannot efficiently make use of that technology.

The Technology Gap Persists

But before delving deeper into the digital literacy divide, it is important to demonstrate that the access divide has not dissolved. The area in which the technology digital divide remains most prevalent is home Internet access. Though both Internet access in general and broadband access specifically have continued to rise, people of color and low-income households in particular are being left behind. In 2003, the NTIA study showed that 58.7% of U.S. households had Net access and 22.8% of households possessed broadband access (23). However, the disaggregation of these data reveals a less positive story. While 65.1% of white households had Net access, only 45.6% of black households and 37.2% of Latino households had Internet access (NTIA 23). That places black and Latino households at 13.1% and 21.5% below the national average,

respectively. Similarly, black and Latino households are 8.6% and 10.2%, respectively, below the national average and about half that of white households in terms of broadband access (NTIA 23). And indeed there has not been significant improvement. A 2007 study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project showed that while 43% of adult Caucasians have broadband access at home, the number is only 29% for Latinos (Livingston 3). Therefore, it is clear that a gap in technology access remains. But what significance does this technology divide have?

Answering this question requires examining where and how information technology is being used. In addition, it requires one to delve into the digital literacy divide. Being able to efficiently use computer technology is integral to succeeding in the digital age. It is necessary in both the school and work environments. Those who do not have at least basic computer skills will inevitably slip behind their peers.

Computers in Classrooms

First, let's examine the trend in the education domain. Another Pew report found that 85% of college students own a computer and that 79% reported that the Internet has a positive influence upon their academic experience (Jones 2, 3). The same study found that across the board, college students go online significantly more than the general population (Ibid. 6). Of course by itself this does not seem that relative; however, when added to a few more findings of the report. Of the college students polled, 73% use the Internet more than the library for research and 48% are required to use the Internet to communicate with other students in at least some classes (Ibid. 3). Taken together, these data indicate that the Internet was a key aspect of college academic life even in 2002. And personal experience has shown it to have only increased. While this does not prove that it is essential to become digitally literate in order to enter college, another aspect of the report is rather revealing. The report concluded that "as users increase their experience online, they are more likely to communicate about serious topics" (Ibid. 9). Like any skill, one must practice to develop it. The student who enters higher education rarely having even used email is at a significant disadvantage. For every project that requires a PowerPoint presentation or the need to access an online message board, she must learn how to use the technology in addition to completing the task

Workplace Woes

Digital literacy goes beyond college and potential-college students. Those in the workforce are also disadvantaged because of the digital divide. Workers also have to send email, create presentations, learn new technology, etc. to secure jobs and/or maintain their positions and without a doubt, for advancement. Finally, for each worker who does not know how to complete a technology-related task, their employer is penalized (both in terms of time and money). Would it not be better for them to enter the job already possessing at least the basic skills?

Technology Improves Lives

The benefits of digital literacy go beyond this narrow view. The Internet is important in general. A 2006 study found that between 2000 and 2005, there had been an increase in the number of Americans claiming the Internet had played an important role in the following areas of their lives: 50% in pursuing more training in their careers, 45% in making major financial decisions, 43% in looking for a new place to live, 42% in

deciding on a school/college, and 14% in switching jobs (Horrigan and Rainie 1). And about 60% of African Americans and Latinos with Internet access have used it for job hunting. In addition, out of the unemployed with Net access, about 10% are searching for jobs daily (Boyce and Rainie 1). Clearly, the Internet is an essential tool in improving people's lives. A more recent survey on the Internet activities of adults is even more telling and also goes a long way in demonstrating the importance of closing the broadband gap. For example, the table shows that 67% of Internet users use it to get the news; however, only 53% of dial-up users perform this activity compared to 76% of broadband users ("Table 1129"). Similarly, for all activities (including looking for a job or information on politics) except for email, broadband users far surpass their dial-up peers (Ibid.). This information illustrates some of the significance in both the divides between Internet users and non-Internet user and the divide between dial-up and broadband users. And because minorities and lower-income individuals trail behind in both areas, they are being left behind in terms of career success, financial knowledge and in examining the world around them. It is a vicious cycle. The low-income man knows less about how to invest his hard-earned income because he cannot afford the time to trek to the library or the money on self-help books.

But how can this problem be rectified? Many suggest that the entire burden should fall on a single sector of society. Either the public or private sector should champion the cause alone. Others insist that the solution consists of handing out cheap personal computers to the poor. Both are misconceptions that arise from flawed reasoning. Neither the government, nor corporations, nor NGOs can, nor should, bear the full brunt of bridging the divide. Rather, cooperation from all sectors is imperative.

Donate to Libraries & Schools

One common well-intentioned but ill-fated solution arises from the misunderstanding that the digital divide is solely about the gap between those who have and do not have the technology. The solution they propose is to provide schools and libraries with plenty of computers and to ensure that Internet access is available. The belief is that even if one does not own a computer or is not connected at home, "one can...visit a library to plug into the Internet" (Wiedbrauk). While one could simply travel to the nearest library and libraries/schools are an important part of burying the divide, this oversimplified answer misses a number of key issues. Obviously, there are convenience and availability issues (remember 73% of college students turn to the Internet first), but there are also more important factors one must consider. . One is censorship. "The internet-content [*sic*] filters most commonly used by schools block needed, legitimate content more often than not, according to a study by a university librarian" (Murray 1). Students conducting legitimate research are literally blocked by filters supposedly implemented to protect. And regardless of one's opinions on legitimacy of the filters themselves, it is clear that this hampers those who only have access to the Internet via their school or library.

The library/school solution segues into the critical issue of digital literacy and proficiency. The principle problem with it is that it does not address the issue of proficiency. Even if a school or library has the necessary technology, it become completely useless if the user does not know how to operate it. Like driving a car without any prior instruction, it can be frustrating and dangerous. What is even worse is when the people in charge do not have the essential skills either. The case of the

operators improperly implementing the filters is a microcosm of a general problem. A study on computer usage in classrooms found that the limited training t teachers received was inefficient and a waste of funds (Joseph and Shanbarger 2). Thus, even teachers who receive training on how to use the technology are so poorly instructed that they are still unable to assist their students. Time and money have been spent yet the situation is no better, and perhaps even worse. After all, is that not what leads to practices like filters, which are implemented but incorrectly? Thus training must be effective. Teachers (and librarians) need hands-on instruction where they can experience the reality of solving problems and not simply learn the theory behind it or observe an expert accomplish the task.

But is it absolutely necessary to train the adults? Kids just seem to pick it up, right? Well, besides the fact that (at least in the case of librarians) those maintaining the computers will also be dealing with adult users, the study also found that good training is imperative. In the study, the authors compare two schools; one located in an urban area, the other in a high-end suburban neighborhood. The urban school had far more technology yet the suburban school made far better use of the technology. The report notes two prevailing reasons: The suburban students were “already acclimated to the use of computers” and the “district had the support staff to keep their technology running” (Joseph and Shanbarger 3). So even though the urban school had the technology, it was outclassed because neither the students nor teachers knew how to efficiently employ it. The teachers lacked training. The students lacked training as well as the familiarity that comes with having the technology available at home. Clearly, donating computers is not the end-all to bridging the digital divide. If governments and corporations simply donate technology, it is akin to giving a woman a fish and failing to inform her that she can eat it.

Truths & Solutions

So what must be done? The digital divide will only truly disappear when the social and economic ailments that produced it are solved. Until then, there are ways of combating the symptoms. As is the case in such problems, there is no paint-by-numbers solution, but there are areas that must be addressed.

First, closing the gap requires the cooperation of the government, corporations, and NGOs. NGOs are capable of identifying programs and solutions, but they need funding for implementation. The government possesses the power to execute programs, but is often less informed about specific solutions than NGOs. Meanwhile, corporations are the best source of funding. Some would argue this is only fair as they are also the ones who most benefit from the solution. As noted before, those being helped and improved as residents and workers are (or most likely in the future will) find themselves employed by these very corporations.

Any solution must empower the poor and ethnic minorities. Social and economic disparity not only causes the divide, but is also perpetuated by it. If people fall behind technologically, they will be unable to pursue meaningful, well-paid careers, receive a good education, or reap the benefits associated with resources that are only available via technology and this will adversely impact the quality of their lives and society as a whole. Therefore, the solution should concentrate on developing the skills needed to excel in the digital age. This means that everyone must be able to type a report, create a PowerPoint presentation, search for a job/school online, know how to use Internet research resources,

etc. More generally, this means possessing the abilities to access, manage, integrate, evaluate, and create information and to do so in an ethical manner (“California ICT Digital Literacy” 9). For if an individual cannot operate in society---and this is what our society has become---then he will become a drain upon himself, his family, and society at large. But she who is comfortable within her environment becomes a boon, directly or indirectly improving those around her and thus all of society.

As has been stated, technology alone cannot close the divide. People must also be educated in how to use the technology. Part and parcel of training is ensuring that he whom is being taught is actually learning. Besides developing effective programs in which people learn and are not simply instructed achievement must be measured. Standards should be established and benchmarks recorded, whether for students, teachers, or workers. By doing so, all participants commit to improvement. And essentially guarantee that the person will not end off worse than with no training at all. “A little knowledge is a dangerous thing” to both the user and those who employ him. Likewise, students can access the Internet, but do not know how to use it educationally, are essentially in the same place but with an added distraction. And of course, it is imperative that the programs be sustainable. If the program crumbles soon after being built, then the undeserved are left unserved and the funds have essentially been wasted.

Finally, it should be reiterated that although technology alone cannot bridge the digital divide, it is essential. There are still gaps between different segments of the population. As the increase in broadband usage fosters services and applications that rely upon faster Internet speed, many are being left in the dust on the information highway (when they have even managed to obtain a vehicle). Again, this is most prevalent among those in lower income brackets and racial minorities, especially African Americans and Latinos. It is even more drastic for non-English speaking Latinos with only 1 in 3 ever going online (Livingston 2).

Conclusion

The digital divide cannot be allowed to foster a society of haves and have nots. It is a social and economic burden upon both disconnected individuals and the society that is missing their involvement. As any issue that arises out of deeper social and economic conditions, simply treating the symptoms will not dissolve the digital gap. We must first understand that the divide is not only a symptom, but an infection as well. Leaving the gap erodes economic stability as people – most likely the future workforce of ethnic minorities, limited English speakers and low income wage owners -- fall through the cracks. Support via resources, hardware and training will close the divide, which is of benefit to the entire society. As has been shown, some of the principle activities Net users access improve them as workers, citizens, and human beings. The Internet (and computer technology in general) can be employed to engage individuals to become more politically involved/aware, learn new career skills, or to conduct research for a presentation. To deny those possibilities to large sections of the community is a travesty. Thus, the digital divide must be closed.

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