

The New Digital Divide – What It Means for Grassroots Going Forward

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First presented and published at IPDI's Politics Online Conference

March 11, 2005

The term “digital divide” was originally coined to define the gap between white and non-white use of online technology, particularly during the internet boom in the mid-late 1990s. Since the turn of the century, however, recent studies show that the digital divide is shifting dramatically. The new digital dividing line is not race or ethnicity but education and income. In short, internet use is becoming a class-based activity. Organizations must take notice if they wish to maximize their advocacy and fundraising efforts. Below, this article examines current patterns of internet use in America and also draws conclusions for political parties, non-profit organizations and corporations that are planning active outreach campaigns.

Table 1:

Internet Penetration by U.S. Household Ethnicity		
	2001	2007
Caucasian and other	62%	81%
African-American	45%	69%
Hispanic	45%	68%
Asian-American	63%	82%

Source: Jupiter Research

The Facts about African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans Online Today

The digital divide is swiftly closing. Latinos, African-Americans other minorities are online in stronger numbers than ever before. In fact, as the level of education increases, Hispanic online usage actually tends to match or exceed that of Whites in America.

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Table 2:

<i>Race, ethnicity & education</i>	
<i>Goes Online</i>	
Whites, education level	
Less than high school	24%
High School	46
Some College	73
College +	83
Blacks, education level	
Less than high school	15%
High School	40
Some College	61
College +	76
Hispanics, education level	
Less than high school	26%
High School	42
Some College	71
College +	87

Source: PEW Internet & American Life Project
 March-May 2002 Survey. N-3553. Margin of error +/- 2%

Furthermore, their rate of adoption of the latest internet technologies is increasing at a higher rate than many other groups. For example, African-Americans and English-speaking Hispanics are more likely than Whites to use instant messaging and participate in online chat rooms and discussion groups, according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project.

Race, ethnicity & income	
<i>The correct way to read the first line is: 32% of whites living in households earning less than \$20,000 use the Internet.</i>	
<i>Goes Online</i>	
Whites, household income	
Less than \$20,000 annual	32%
\$20,000-\$50,000	57
More than \$50,000	82
Blacks, household income	
Less than \$20,000 annual	25%
\$20,000-\$50,000	55
More than \$50,000	65
Hispanics, household income	
Less than \$20,000 annual	28%
\$20,000-\$50,000	60
More than \$50,000	82

Table 3:

Source: PEW Internet & American Life Project
 March-May 2002 Survey. N-3553. Margin of error +/- 2%

The Pew Internet and American Life Center found that 62% of English-speaking Hispanics were online in August 2003. This represents a potential maximum online audience for outreach efforts of 24.4 million people. The U.S. Census reports that out of 28.8 million who speak Spanish at home in 2002, over half say they speak English very well. Another 10 million speak English only.

Last Feb 2003, ComScore Networks estimated that there was an online

audience of 15 million Latinos for 2002, growing at a rate of 20% per year. That far eclipses African-American usage which was pegged at 10 million (Nielsen/NetRatings) for 2002. So the online Hispanic audience today is somewhere between 20 and 24 million people. It's a safe assumption that the Black online audience has also increased dramatically by a factor of millions during the same period.

Black and Latino Online \$\$\$

The surge of African-Americans online combines phenomenal increases in buying power, a growing population, and rising Internet penetration to create a significant cultural shift in how Black Americans communicate with each other. The African-American community is becoming a strong online presence and is creating its own unique identity in the space.

Research from Selig Center for Economic Growth, Terry College of Business, The University of Georgia indicates that the nation's Black buying power will surge from \$688 billion in 2002 to \$921 billion in 2008 when almost nine cents of every dollar spent will be from an African-American consumer.

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Comparatively, White buying power is expected to reach \$8.50 trillion by 2008, representing a 25.9 increase over 2003, while African-Americans will see a 34 percent increase over the same period.

A recent (Mar 2004) Jupiter Research report found that 27.7% of Hispanics online will make at least one purchase using the internet this year, edging out blacks by .6%. That is behind Caucasians (45.5%) and Asian-Americans(55.8%), but shows promise. 58% of Hispanics have engaged in e-commerce at least once in their online history.

Implications for Advocacy and Fundraising

Now more than ever, the time is right to reach out to minorities that may have been overlooked before using online technology. The old stereotypes of who's online and who is not just don't apply anymore. Almost any organization stands to gain from more careful, targeted outreach to those who can both support the organization and benefit from its programs.

Mainline political parties and civil rights organizations in particular risk losing valuable, active and affluent audiences to upstarts if they do not build serious online programs targeted to well-educated, high income minorities – a group of people numbering in the tens of millions. Yet, there is a danger that over-emphasis on online organizing will generate a class-based backlash if online activity becomes associated with elitism. Efforts must be made to bridge the digital divide opening among those Americans making \$35,000 or less and those who have a high school education or lower.

Cheryl Contee is a Senior Consultant at Issue Dynamics Inc., a Washington D.C. based public affairs and strategic alliances firm. Ms. Contee has years of experience helping organizations motivate diverse audiences -- both online and offline. If you are interested in learning more about how IDI can help you effectively structure your online outreach, raise money for your organization and win campaigns, please feel free to contact her at ccontee@idi.net or at (202) 263-2579.

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