

The Gap by Andy Carvin

This year, 2006, marks the 10th anniversary of the advent of the digital divide—a major societal challenge that, sadly, has been pushed aside and forgotten in recent years.

Rewind to 1996: middle-class Americans were just beginning to explore the possibilities of the Internet as a tool for education, civic engagement, and entertainment. Yet less affluent citizens, lacking the necessary skills and exposure, did not enjoy the same access to these opportunities.

The so-called “Digital Divide” made prominent headlines that year when high-profile pundits, from President Bill Clinton to network news anchors, popularized the term in addressing the growing inequities that appeared to accompany the technological revolution. Today, however, you’re not likely to hear much mention of the digital divide on the news or your favorite political blog. As with other political and social issues, conversation about the digital divide ebbs and flows—and for several years now we’ve been wallowing at a low watermark.

Just what happened to the digital divide debate? With the proliferation of the Internet and so many people online today, you might assume that the problem has dissipated. But the reality is far more complex than that.

Just ask Reina Huerta, the technology integration specialist at the Tito Puente Educational Complex in New York’s East Harlem. A 23-year teaching veteran of the New York City public schools, who’s also served there as a certified library media specialist, Huerta spends her days putting computers and other technology tools into the hands of teachers and staff. It’s a struggle, she says, especially in a challenging environment, where teachers are often overwhelmed by more pressing issues like class management, behavior problems, and transient students. Many staff also come out of the local neighborhood, says Huerta, and so haven’t had the means to gain the same familiarity with computers that’s pretty much a given among middle-class workers.

While the demographics of East Harlem have shifted slightly over the years—more Spanish-speaking immigrants these days come

from Mexico—it remains a poor, struggling community. At Tito Puente—which serves more than 800 sixth through eighth graders, plus a special needs program—over 90 percent of the primarily Hispanic and African-American students qualify for free lunch.

So mention the digital divide to Huerta, who splits her job between Tito Puente and a similarly underserved elementary school in the Bronx, and she responds, almost in a whisper, “Oh, yes, it’s still there.”

The National Picture

Indeed, the latest national figures indicate the persistence of a disturbing gap along racial lines. According to “A Nation Online,” the last major federal study on the subject published in 2004, Caucasian and Asian-American households were more likely to be online than African-American households, which in turn were more likely to be wired than Latino households. And while overall Web use rose for each demographic group—about 60 percent of U.S. households were online, up from less than 20 percent in 1997—the hierarchy of access has remained essentially the same for the last decade.

Of the income divide, the report revealed that more than 80 percent of households earning more than \$70,000 per year are online, compared to barely 30 percent of households earning less than \$15,000 a year.

For me, though, the most telling statistics relate to education. Nearly nine out of 10 households in which someone has attained graduate-level education were online. In contrast, less than one in five households, 16 percent of people without a high school diploma, had Internet access. Though shocking, these statistics should come as no surprise. Despite all the incredible advances in streaming video and Web-based multimedia, the Internet remains a text-dominant medium. If you lack a strong foundation in literacy skills, all the Internet access in the world isn’t going to do you a lot of good.

Off the Political Radar—for Now, at Least

Unfortunately, the digital divide is rarely addressed as a major policy issue in America. But as the U.S. struggles to improve its schools, while dragging its heels at improving our national broadband infrastructure, countries like India and China are churning out highly skilled young people for their workforces. At the same time, Nordic countries and Korea deploy ubiquitous Internet access. Other nations are creating government ministries to spur technological and educational innovation, while American digital divide policies have fallen off the docket. America is losing its competitiveness because we're not making the necessary investments in education and infrastructure.

Fortunately, there is still positive work being done. The federal e-rate program continues to enable low-income schools and libraries to connect to the Internet, while nonprofit and private sector entities invest in local and national efforts dedicated to bridging the gap (see "Bridging the Divide," above). Meanwhile, copyright initiatives like Creative Commons ease the way for people to publish their own content for broad public use. And open courseware initiatives from universities, such as MIT, are making some of the most coveted curriculum freely available, whether you can afford to attend the brick-and-mortar institutions or not.

The challenge remains, however, to get the digital divide back on the national agenda. The disparity in technology access must be viewed as a national threat—to our economic competitiveness, our civil rights, and our national creed of equal opportunity. While it may be true that seven out of 10 Americans are online, we shouldn't pat ourselves on the back just yet. Not as long as disenfranchised, underserved Americans remain on the wrong side of the divide.

Bridging the Divide, One Family at a Time

On a cold January evening, 20 or so middle school students in East Harlem, NY, are headed back to school, trailed by their parents or guardians. It's not a PTA meeting that brings them here, but a unique program that will provide each family with a home computer, along with training and support, in an effort to bring 21st-century tools to a struggling neighborhood that has otherwise gone without. The program, sponsored by the nonprofit

organization Computers for Youth (CFY), has provided 6,000 computers to families since 1999 through a partnership with 14 low-income middle schools across New York City.

This night, about a dozen CFY staff and teachers from the school, the Tito Puente Educational Complex, greet their guests before everyone sits down to enjoy a supper of pizza and hero sandwiches. Then in the computer labs, Reina Huerta, the school's technology instructional specialist, leads a group of Spanish-speaking parents, many of whom "haven't touched a mouse before," she says. By evening's end, "They're comfortable navigating screens," Huerta says proudly. Unlike most middle-class adults, who have the social and work contacts to expose them to technology, poor people simply don't have the same resources, explains Kallen Tsikalas, CFY's director of research. That's where CFY comes in.

After providing families with refurbished PCs, CFY follows up with training sessions, supported by a bilingual help desk. The result: 74 percent of students reported their CFY computer helped them do better in school, while 71 percent of parents reported using their new computer to help their children do schoolwork. With plans to expand the program nationally, CFY is expecting to serve four cities in the next five years and eventually, more than 20,000 families, says Tsikalas.

Author Information

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