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The Digital Divide in the Fall of 2002

Jeffrey Barlow
Pacific University

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The Digital Divide in the Fall of 2002

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By Jeffrey Barlow <barlowj@pacificu.edu>

Editor, Interface

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.01 INTRODUCTION (return to index)

One of the potential impacts of the Internet that many find particularly appealing is the promise of democratization. It is hoped by some that the Internet might tend to level social and economic differences by providing access to information in its many forms to all. To those with such ideals, it is particularly disturbing to recognize that it is also possible that the Internet will increase social and economic distinctions if it is not equally available to all. The gap between groups in their use of or access to the Internet is usually referred to as the “digital divide.”

In this editorial and the following one for our October issue of Interface, we propose to examine the current state of the digital divide. Here we focus first upon achieving an understanding of the divide according to current information. Then we explore an important debate that is currently raging on whether or not the divide is improving, and what the proper role of the federal government should be in bridging it.

Rather than “digital divide” a better term might really be a plural one, “digital divides.” There are many factors that make the Internet more or less available: socio-economic standing, urban vs. rural residency, race or ethnicity, linguistic group, even, some have argued, gender, differentially
affect Internet access and use. There has not really been a question as to the existence of the digital divides; all authorities recognize their reality. Discussion usually centers on the social implications of the divides, or the best way to bridge them.

But in the winter and spring of 2002, an argument has emerged that the digital divide should be less of a concern because recently it has begun to diminish markedly. The immediate source of this perspective was a study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Commerce, “A Nation Online: How Americans Are Expanding Their Use of the Internet.”[1] “A Nation Online” is an extensive report (the PDF document is 91 pages long) which makes excellent use of the September, 2001, Current Population Survey of the U.S. Census Bureau. Many news stories welcoming the disappearance of the digital divide were based upon its findings.

But “A Nation Online” immediately became controversial. The executive branch cited it in proposing to eliminate in its FY 2003 budget request two large federal programs, the Community Technology Centers Program and the Technology Opportunities Programs, the focus of which has been to encourage community access and demonstration projects respectively.[2] Others, like the Benton Foundation, quickly riposted, arguing to the contrary that in fact “A Nation Online” demonstrates the importance of federal leadership because of the continuing significance of the digital divide.[3]

.02 WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE DIGITAL DIVIDE? (return to index)

The factual database and the statistical analysis in “A Nation Online” are impressive, and it does seem to show that “The distribution of Internet use at home has moved in the direction of lower inequality.”[4] However, the critical responses to “A Nation Online” usually emphasize not the progress made but the gaps that remain. This is certainly a reasonable reaction; the poor, the rural, and the non-white may be better off than formerly, but major inequalities remain and should be addressed.

Particularly controversial has been the conclusion drawn by some that, given the tendency toward lesser inequality, federal efforts are no longer necessary. Many attacked the report not only out of a concern for disadvantaged groups, but perhaps also because important constituencies have coalesced around these large sources of federal funding which bring together community and educational interests. But surely it is legitimate to ask “How much does continued progress depend upon continued federal efforts?” Here, of course, clear conclusions are elusive, though the positive effects of programs such as the two mentioned above have been thoroughly demonstrated.[5]

Much could be said about many other aspects of the digital divide, and there are many useful sources on the Internet for understanding them.[6] As important as this debate is, however, we do not wish to dwell upon it here. In this analysis we intend to focus primarily upon the digital divides as they affect K-12 school children. In doing so, we can also contribute to the larger debate because the primary argument in “A Nation Online” that inequality is decreasing hinges to
an important extent on the impact of schools in reducing the digital divide. As the report states:

*For school age children, we found substantial differences in home access to computers and the Internet according to household income. When school and library use are taken into account, however, differences in computer and Internet use among children were much smaller.*[7]

We understand this argument to be saying that, although household income is a critical variable in home access, schools and libraries are diminishing its impact to an important degree. This is, of course, welcome news. We think, however, that the analysis conceals some serious problems. It in effect equates public access, as in schools and libraries, to home access.

As the father of a 16-year-old daughter, I am well aware of how important computer access is to her. At this stage in her life, it would probably be easier to deprive her of the recently acquired right to drive than the right to surf from home. In this she is like many other young adults in her age group. It is true that her school provides some access. I have helped with computer use in the school labs; upon first entering them, my historian’s heart was gladdened to think that I had discovered a computing museum. Facilities have improved somewhat with subsequent bond issues, but her home access still is far superior to anything provided at school, both in terms of technological quality, speed of access, and availability.

There is more than enough data to demonstrate that this is true for all children, not merely for my daughter with her relatively wired family and her rural school. A recent Pew Charitable Foundations report makes it clear that the difference between access in even the most advanced schools and home access is, to the students themselves, like night and day.[8]

Students point out that the quality of access at schools is a formidable barrier to the use of the Internet; that blocking and filtering software impede legitimate educational use, and that there are many other subtle consequences of not having home use.[9] For example, a simple inability to determine the uses to which they put their time because of tight schedules at school means that many students will have to give up lunch or some other important element of their educational day to gain access to computers at school.

The image of public library access making a critical difference in bridging this particular aspect of the divide is risible. All the public libraries with which I am familiar (Forest Grove and Portland, Oregon) have too few machines and too little technical support to make a marked difference in the lives of all but a few children or adults.

The analysis in “A Nation Online” also treats “Internet access” as an undifferentiated phenomenon: you either have it or you don’t. It would be true, for example, to say that a child with a payphone in the basement of his or her school and the child toting a high-end web-browsing cell phone both have access to telephonic communication, but such a statement ignores many important distinctions. As, clearly, does the position taken in “A Nation Online” that Internet access is Internet access, period.
Another Pew Trust study makes it clear that not only does the quantity of time spent on the Internet increase markedly with broadband access but so does the quality of the time spent. Interestingly, the single most important factor that rises with broadband access is the time spent searching for information. Broadband users are extremely sophisticated and loudly affirm the importance of broadband access to their education, their shopping, their ability to do their work, and their access to health care information as well as their ability to “learn new things”, a statement affirmed by 86% of broadband users studied in the course of the Pew research. And, as might be expected, other, less educational or research-oriented uses of the Internet such as downloading music, viewing videos, or playing games online also rise exponentially. The changes are cumulatively so marked that this Pew study refers to “an emerging broadband lifestyle.”[10]

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On balance, we think that the findings of “A Nation Online” are flawed in important ways. Not because of partisan intentions (we cannot comment on these) but because the study was most relevant to an earlier stage of Internet technology. There was a time when it was enough to know if certain groups did or did not have Internet access. But the technology has developed so rapidly that we now need more information as to the quality of access available. And, of course, there still remains an important differential in simple access among particular groups. We think that continued federal support is necessary and that the digital divide(s) has yet to be bridged.

Some of the conclusions toward which we are moving here surely are controversial: we believe not only that federal action is necessary to continually reduce the most basic element of the digital divide, access to the Internet, but feel also that broadband access is itself an emerging digital divide. In our next editorial to be published in early October (Interface is not published in September) we shall clarify and extend this position.

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[5] See, for example, the materials in “Bringing a Nation Online: The Importance of Federal Leadership” A Report by the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Education Fund and the Benton Foundation With Support from the Ford Foundation Prepared by Leslie Harris &

[6] See for example the Digital Divide Network  
at: http://www.digitaldividenetwork.org/content/sections/index.cfm  


[9] p. 18-24  


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10 THOUGHTS ON “THE DIGITAL DIVIDE IN THE FALL OF 2002”  

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 **telewizja**  
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on January 30, 2014 at 2:29 PM said:  

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You certainly put a new spin on a topic that has been written about for a long time.  
Great stuff, just excellent!  

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Cherise Schmider
on January 30, 2014 at 6:16 PM said:

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plotka
on February 1, 2014 at 1:56 AM said:

Thank you to your sharing! I have the exact same problem.

filmy
on February 1, 2014 at 2:16 AM said:

I also, want a followup to this repair. It can be fasinating. I as soon as had a repair created on the cast iron exhaust manifold for just a 1932 Packard.
Matthew

on February 1, 2014 at 5:16 AM said:

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naija

on February 3, 2014 at 1:42 AM said:

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temat

on February 3, 2014 at 1:55 AM said:

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