

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE



The National Communication Association and the Digital Divide

As the largest national association representing Communication scholars, teachers, and practitioners, the National Communication Association (NCA) is firmly committed to the goal of fostering and promoting free and ethical communication, including via electronic resources. In 1999, the association adopted a [resolution](#) addressing the digital divide, and updated the resolution in 2013.

Definition

The term “digital divide,” often attributed to Lloyd Morrisett, former president of the Markle Foundation, came into widespread use after the National Telecommunications & Information Administration (NTIA) published its third “Falling Through the Net” report on access to emerging technologies in 1998. For NCA, the term refers to the economic, geographic, and information literacy barriers that limit use of technology.

History

As society has turned with increasing frequency to information communication technology (ICT) to accomplish both simple and complex tasks, from submitting homework assignments to accessing health records, conducting video job interviews, banking, and more, the economic and social consequences of the digital divide have grown.

Initially, concern over the digital divide centered on access to computers (cost) and the Internet (availability). Although buying a computer or even a smart phone is out of the reach of many low-income people, and there are still areas of the country that can access the Internet only via dial-up modems, equipment costs have fallen, and telecommunications companies have built up their networks over time to cover more households.

Why, then, does the digital divide persist? Research indicates that the gap is now more likely to be skills-based, meaning that a lack of knowledge about how to use computers or the information and services found online prevents people from enjoying the benefits of ICT. Research also indicates that the biggest knowledge and usage gaps are found between economic classes, age cohorts, education levels, and geographic areas.

Legislation

Because of the consequential effects of the digital divide, closing the gap is a matter of public policy. Numerous pieces of legislation that either in whole or in part address an aspect of the digital divide have been introduced in Congress, but few have been enacted. The ones that have include:

- Telecommunication Act of 1996
- Internet Tax Freedom Act of 1996
- Workforce Investment Act of 1998
- America COMPETES Act of 2007
- Broadband Data Improvement Act of 2008
- American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009

States have also enacted legislation including:

- Maine Learning Technology Initiative of 2000

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- Eliminate the Digital Divide Law of 2000 (Illinois)
- California Advanced Services Fund of 2013
- Massachusetts IT Bond Bill of 2014

At the same time, 19 states currently restrict or ban municipal broadband services. Despite this opposition to communities finding their own solutions to broadband access problems, nearly 150 municipal systems supply broadband services to local households.

Regulation

On the regulatory front, one of the most troubling recent developments is the Federal Communication Commission's (FCC) 2014 proposal for a two-tiered system to handle Internet traffic. Supported by Internet service providers (ISPs), the proposal to effectively eliminate net neutrality by allowing ISPs to charge different rates for slow and fast download speeds has met with significant resistance from content providers and the public. In fact, the FCC has received nearly 4 million comments to date on its proposal, and the vast majority of these comments have been negative.

Experts

The following individuals have agreed to talk with press about the digital divide and potential solutions. To set up an interview, please contact the [external affairs staff](#) at NCA.

Dr. Lynn Schofield Clark
Professor and Chair, Department of Media Film and Journalism Studies
Director, Estlow International Center for Journalism and New Media
University of Denver

Dr. Eszter Hargittai
Delaney Family Professor
Communication Studies Department
Northwestern University

Dr. Seong-Jae Min
Department of Communication Studies
Pace University

Dr. Sharon Strover
Philip G. Warner Regents Professor
University of Texas at Austin

Resources

Below is a selection of resources. Please keep in mind that many scholarly articles and books have addressed the digital divide over the nearly 20 years since the phenomenon was first reported on in depth by the NTIA, so this list should not be considered all-inclusive, but rather as a good starting point that provides both general overviews and specific details on certain related topics.

Articles by Communication Scholars

The US Digital Divide: A Call for a New Philosophy
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2014.922207>

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Crypto War II

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15295036.2014.921320#.VCxePRZKbJE>

Who's responsible for the Digital Divide? Public perceptions and policy implications

<https://sri.cornell.edu/sri/files/EpsteinNisbetGillespie-WholsResponsibleForTheDigitalDivide-2011.pdf>

From the Digital Divide to the democratic divide: Internet skills, political interest, and the second-level Digital Divide in political Internet use.

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/19331680903109402#preview>

Internet Use in Low-Income Families: Implications for the Digital Divide

<http://nhitunderserved.org/resources/media/documents/lowDigdiv.pdf>

Articles by Communication Scholars (not open access)

A Growing Digital Divide: Internet Freedom and the Negative Impact of Command-and-Control Networking

<http://www.computer.org/csdl/mags/ic/2011/04/mic2011040075-abs.html>

This article focuses on broadband use and network control by users.

Second thoughts: toward a critique of the digital divide

<http://nms.sagepub.com/content/5/4/499.abstract>

This article focuses on the terminology and reasoning that underpin research into the digital divide.

Articles from Other Sources

The broadband Digital Divide and the economic benefits of mobile broadband for rural areas.

<http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1040&context=sppworkpapers>

Are changes in the Digital Divide consistent with global equality or inequality?

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01972243.2011.548705?journalCode=utis20#preview>

Computer usage and access in low-income urban communities

<http://journalistsresource.org/studies/society/internet/computer-usage-access-low-income-urban-communities#>

Court Tosses Rules of Road for Internet

<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304049704579320500441593462>

The Digital Divide: Free Expression, Technology and a Fair Democracy

http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2245072

The New Digital Divide

<http://galibtech.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Internet-Access-and-the-New-Divide-NYTimes.com.pdf>

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Low-Income Urban High School Students' Use of the Internet to Access Financial Aid

<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ965804.pdf>

Capitalizing on Digital Entrepreneurship for Low-Income Residents and Communities

<http://test.washburnlaw.edu/profiles/faculty/activity/fulltext/jackson-janet-2009-112westvirginialawreview187.pdf>

Silicon Ceilings: Information Technology Equity, the Digital Divide and the Gender Gap among Information Technology Professionals

<http://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1016&context=njti>
[p](#)

The Telecommunications Act of 1996: Codifying the Digital Divide

<http://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1149&context=fclj>

Articles from Other Sources (not open access)

Exploring the Digital Divide on the U.S.-Mexico border through literacy narratives.

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S8755461512000370>

This article explores two students' very different transitions, in terms of technological literacy, from high school to college.

The correlates of the Digital Divide and their impact on college student learning.

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S036013150600114X>

This article describes the computer knowledge levels of a sample of college students, and some of the different ways they use computers, as well as conditions that affect knowledge and use.

Book Chapters

Handbook of research on overcoming Digital Divides: Constructing an equitable and competitive information society

Beyond the Digital Divide: Closing the generation and disability gaps?

<http://www.igi-global.com/chapter/beyond-digital-divide/38308>

Generation, education, gender, and ethnicity in American Digital Divides.

<http://www.igi-global.com/chapter/generation-education-gender-ethnicity-american/38318>

The Digital Divides in the U.S.: Access, broadband, and nature of Internet use.

<http://www.igi-global.com/chapter/digital-divides-access-broadband-nature/38319>

Web Sites

National Telecommunications & Information Administration

<http://www.ntia.doc.gov/>

Pew Research Internet Project

<http://www.pewinternet.org/topics/digital-divide/pages/2/>

Federal Communication Commission Open Internet

<http://www.fcc.gov/openinternet>

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IEEE Computer Society

<http://www.computer.org/portal/web/guest/home>

50x15 and ICT

<http://www.internetworldstats.com/links10.htm>

WhatIs—digital divide

<http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/digital-divide>

The Internet Association

<http://internetassociation.org/>

Community Broadband

http://www.baller.com/comm_broadband.html

Reports

What can we learn from 800,000 public comments on the FCC's net neutrality plan?

<http://sunlightfoundation.com/blog/2014/09/02/what-can-we-learn-from-800000-public-comments-on-the-fccs-net-neutrality-plan/>

Broadband Internet Access and the Digital Divide: Federal Assistance Programs

<http://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RL30719.pdf>

Smart policies to close the digital divide: Best practices from around the world

<http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/un-dpadm/unpan049753.pdf>

The Evolution and Application of Digital Divide Research: Building a digital community in Illinois

<http://igpa.uillinois.edu/system/files/IR09/text/ch10-digital-divide.pdf>

Internet Use and Depression among the Elderly

<http://www.phoenix-center.org/pcpp/PCPP38Final.pdf>

Digital Differences

http://www.pewinternet.org/files/old-media/Files/Reports/2012/PIP_Digital_differences_041312.pdf

Predictors of eHealth Usage: Insights on The Digital Divide from the Health Information National Trends Survey 2012

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4129114/>

It's Working: People from Low-Income Families Disproportionately Use Library Computers

<https://docs.gatesfoundation.org/documents/lowincome0209.pdf>

Falling Through the Net: A Survey of the "Have Nots" in Rural and Urban America

<http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/fallingthru.html>

About the National Communication Association

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The National Communication Association (NCA) advances Communication as the discipline that studies all forms, modes, media, and consequences of communication through humanistic, social scientific, and aesthetic inquiry. NCA serves the scholars, teachers, and practitioners who are its members by enabling and supporting their professional interests in research and teaching. Dedicated to fostering and promoting free and ethical communication, NCA promotes the widespread appreciation of the importance of communication in public and private life, the application of competent communication to improve the quality of human life and relationships, and the use of knowledge about communication to solve human problems.

For more information, visit natcom.org, follow us on Twitter at [@natcomm](https://twitter.com/natcomm), and find us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/NationalCommunicationAssociation.