

The Digital Divide & The Information Society

110, Spring 2003

Session 18

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Information Society Concept

- By mid-1990s, Internet Seen as Key to revolutionary changes in
 - Education
 - Entertainment
 - Work
 - Personal Communication
- A lot of hype
 - The “.com” boom and the new economy
 - Mass hysteria

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Information Superhighway

- Popular idea in early 1990s
 - Tied particularly to Al Gore
 - Who really was important in funding Internet development
- Public role in boosting general access to computer networks
 - Encouraging high speed technologies
 - Fostering widespread deployment
 - Improving access to public life and government
- Originally tied to TV/computer convergence idea

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Digital Divide in Clinton Era

- 1998 government report:
 - “Falling Through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide”
- Idea of “digital divide” picked up by media
 - Uneven participation in computer revolution
 - Is access to computers/internet the new civil rights issue?
- Fits with centrist agenda of Clinton/Gore
 - Socially concerned, but technology oriented
 - Government partnership with private business

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Discuss Question 1

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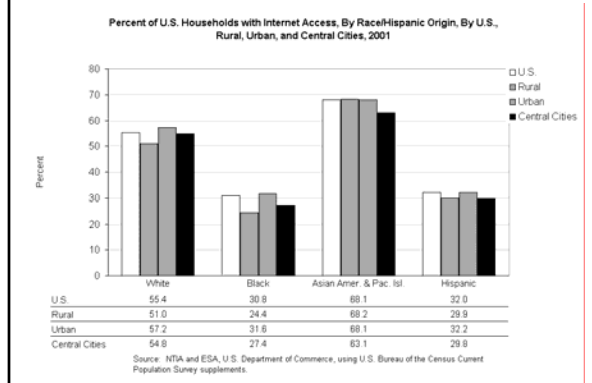
Different Divides

- National – many divides within USA
 - Race
 - Urban vs. Rural
 - Rich versus Poor
 - Access for handicapped, old, etc.
- International
 - Rich (Europe, US, parts of Asia) vs
 - Poor (Africa, S. America, much of Asia)
 - Sharp social divisions within developing countries

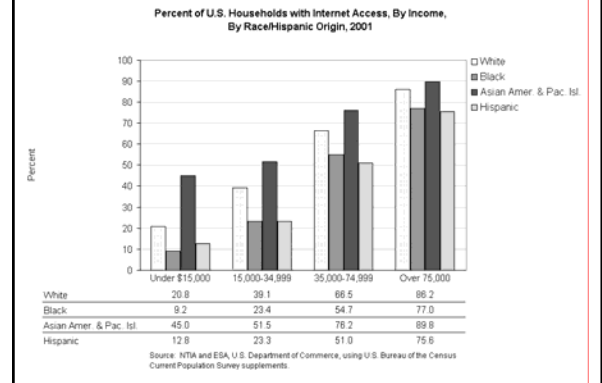
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Graph by Race and Location



Graph by Race and Income



Various Federal Programs

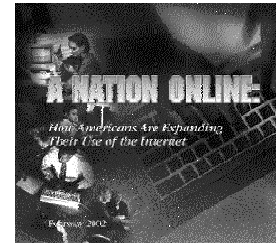
- Aims include
 - "Wiring the schools"
 - Internet in libraries
 - Tax breaks for donation of hardware and software
 - Requirements for rural phone lines
- Technology Opportunities Program
 - Dept. of Commerce – money to schools, libraries, community groups, etc.
- Community Technology Center Initiative
 - Dept. of Education

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Bush Era

- Shifts to upbeat message "A Nation Online"
- Claim gap is rapidly closing
 - Others analyze same data but disagree
 - One estimate is "lag" of 20 years for catchup
- Seeks to eliminate digital access programs



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Discuss Question 2

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Historical Parallels

- People argue about which technology is parallel. Diffusion of
 - Electrical power for factories?
 - Printing press?
 - Television?
 - DVD player?
- Is this a gap that matters (like literacy)
 - Or a gap that doesn't – like BMW divide
 - Do people who don't have access want it?

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What Exactly is the Divide?

- Originally it was between
 - People with Internet access (or computer)
 - People without Internet access (or computer)
- Technological sense is shifting
 - Dialup versus high bandwidth
 - Own computer versus communal, etc.
- Also attempts to broaden idea
 - Include skills, culture, etc. needed to use effectively

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Is the solution technological?

- According to the late Rob Kling (quoted by Warschauer)

"[The] big problem with "the digital divide " framing is that it tends to connote "digital solutions," i.e., computers and telecommunications, without engaging the important set of complementary resources and complex interventions to support social inclusion..."

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Is Technology Access Enough?

- Examples in Warschauer reading
 - Just putting computer into slum achieves little
- Community involvement is crucial
 - Look for other
- Showpiece technology often underused
 - Computer labs, electronic classrooms, etc.

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Technological Infrastructure

- On technological level, Internet is harder to provide than just a computer
 - Need ISP and account
 - Need suitable audio, DSL, cable, etc connection
 - Need skills to setup and maintain connection and computer
 - Not just a one-time installation

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Global Dimensions

- "Digital Divide" is increasing target for international development
 - Whole countries as "have nots"
- Parallels with previous efforts to boost technological development
 - Industry
 - Agriculture
 - Medicine

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Discuss Question 3

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