


# Equalizing Access to Information: Libraries' Role in Narrowing the Digital Divide

Susan E. Russell and Jie Huang  
University of Oklahoma Libraries  
U.S.A.

# Digital divide

The digital divide, which is a world-wide social phenomenon, “refers to the perceived gap between those who have access to the latest information technologies and those who do not,” and it is usually measured by computer ownership and Internet accessibility.



# Digital divide in the U.S.: Narrowing but remaining

## Achievement:

- 70 million American households, or 62%, had one or more computers in 2003, an increase from 56% in 2001;
- 62 million households, or 55%, had Internet access, which increased from 50% in 2001;
- Many more adults used the Internet to access the online information in 2003 (40%) than in 1997 (7%);
- More than half of adults (55%) used e-mail or instant messaging for communications in 2003, compared with 12% of adults in 1997;
- About one-third of adults (32%) made online purchases, compared with only 2% in 1997.

## Continued

- The percentage of Internet use jumped to 71% in 2007;
- The percentage of American households that have broadband Internet connections more than doubled from 9% in 2001 to 20% in 2003;
- Total number of broadband lines reached 82.5 million in December 2006, compared with 6.8 million lines in December 2000;
- Among them, over 58 million lines serve residential customers

# Continued

- In fall 2005, nearly 100% of public schools had access to the Internet, a 65% increase since 1994;
- Of those schools, 97% with Internet access used broadband connections, and 45% used wireless connections;
- The ratio of students to instructional computers with Internet access decreased from 12 to 1 in 1998 to 4 to 1 in 2005.

# Continued

## Problem:

- People aged 65 or older, African Americans and Hispanics continue to have lower percentages of computer ownership. Their rates only reach 35%, 45% and 44% respectively, much lower than the national average of 62%;
- The digital divide can also be observed geographically. For instance:  
New Hampshire is ranked first for children with both home computer access (87%) and Internet access (79%) while Mississippi was ranked the lowest in this category with home computer access (53%) and Internet access (43%).

## Continued

- Table 1. Percentages of the population that have a home computer and Internet by race/ethnicity

	Computer in Household	Household with Internet Access
White (Non-Hispanic)	63.9%	57.0%
Hispanic	44.3%	36.0%
African American	44.6%	36.0%
Asian American	72.9%	66.7%



## Continued

- Table 2. Percentages of the population that have a home computer and Internet by family annual income

	Computer in Household	Household with Internet Access
Less than \$25,000	41.0%	30.7%
\$25,000-49,999	66.9%	57.3%
\$50,000-\$74,999	83.7%	77.9%
\$75,000-\$99,999	89.8%	85.8%
\$100,000 or more	94.7%	92.2%



## Continued

- Table 3. Percentages of the population that have a home computer and Internet by educational attainment of householder

	Computer in Household	Household with Internet Access
Less than high school graduate	27.9%	20.2%
High school graduate/GED	51.1%	43.1%
Some college or associate's degree	70.7%	62.6%
Bachelor's degree	81.9%	76.8%
Advanced degree	85.8%	81.1%

## Continued

- Table 4. Percentages of the population that have a home computer and Internet by region

	Computer in Household	Household with Internet Access
Northeast	62.5%	56.4%
Midwest	61.3%	53.6%
South	58.8%	51.7%
West	66.7%	59.2%

All data based on U.S. Census Bureau report released in October 2005

# Consequences

Digital divide may have serious economic consequences for some developing countries, disadvantaged low-income households, and minority groups “as information technology skills become increasingly important in the labor market, and the Internet is expected to become a primary medium for communications, commerce, education, and entertainment in the 21st century.”

# What are libraries doing to close this gap?

- Libraries provide communities with free access to Internet-equipped computers, various software and databases, and opportunities for valuable training and assistance provided by their staff.
- Libraries work together and partner with local communities, charitable organizations, and private sectors to accomplish their goal.

# Continued

- Types of library:

Public libraries

School libraries

Academic libraries

Special libraries

Thank You!

