

The Digital Divide and Digital Inclusion

What is the Digital Divide?

- Describes gap(s) in access and competency which prevent a large part of the population from taking full advantage of the educational, social, economic, and other benefits provided by digital technologies
- Many socioeconomic and demographic factors play into the digital divide, and its effects vary depending on the population(s) you are looking at

Populations Affected

- In the US, the main predictors of digital exclusion are age, race, disability, socioeconomic status, level of education, and physical location. Factors interact in different ways, creating variance in how digital exclusion manifests.
- Senior citizens are slower to adopt smartphones and Internet use than younger adults, and even in their own age cohort, poorer seniors lag behind (Smith, 2014).
- While the majority of poor households own at least one smartphone, they are more likely to share few devices between many users, and are less likely to own a full-sized computer or tablet (Anderson & Kumar, 2019).
- In rural areas, lack of infrastructure—or cost of participation—for broadband internet often severely constrains digital access and education at its roots (Fig. 1).
- Users with disabilities experience the divide when digital media fail to offer accessibility options sufficient to provide access on par with what is granted to other users.

Which U.S. counties have access to rural broadband?

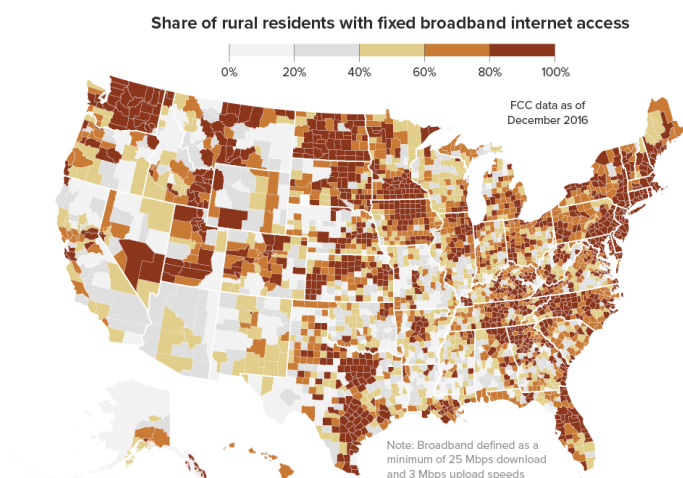


Fig. 1 (Hendel and Doherty, 2018).

Digital Inclusion and the Role of Libraries

- Recognition is growing that simply putting cable and computers in the right places is not enough. “Digital inclusion” encompasses multi-pronged efforts to mitigate the digital divide.
- The main partners involved tend to be state and local governments, libraries, private utilities, and NGOs.
- Libraries are central sites of digital public services in most communities, offering public-use computers, wifi, digital literacy programming, lendable tech, and increasingly large digital collections.
- *Case Study:* Indiana, Putnam County Public Library created a comprehensive digital inclusion plan (ENA, 2018). Under the plan, they created a technology help desk, renovated the children’s library to encourage interactive play with technology, and began offering digital literacy programming (“STEM Wednesdays” and Hour of Code).

Future of the Divide

- While broadband infrastructure will likely improve, a possible recession and continued uncertainty around net neutrality may keep web access expensive. Users may make sacrifices in their home connectivity, or fail to keep up with new tech.
- Libraries should continue to improve their access offerings, and partner with state and local governments to push the trend toward free wifi/municipally-owned broadband in towns and villages.
- While K-12 educators have largely realized the need to teach digital literacy, depth and quality of that education remain inconsistent nation-wide.
- Programs for users who are already adults are in even shorter supply, despite an aging population. The public library remains the main source of community education on common technological issues and needs. Demand for programming will only increase as job applications, tax filing, medical resources, and news and social media continue to cement the web’s centrality in everyday life.
- Libraries have no profit motive, which provides an exciting opportunity for an alternative philosophy of tech. Libraries can center values of pragmatism, user repair, personal privacy, and freedom of access. They can also benefit their communities by educating users on what digital rights they have, and what they might benefit from advocating for.

Sources

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