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America's Digital Divide Narrows

One way or another, many Latinos and other minorities are getting online—but they're missing the full range of interactive Web features

by [Catherine Holahan](#)

As a teacher in an after-school program in Manhattan's Harlem neighborhood, Zayani Lavergne-Friedman dealt firsthand with some of the educational challenges facing minority students. Many of her African-American and Latino students juggled a high school course load with nearly full-time jobs. Others had family obligations, such as caring for younger siblings while parents worked.

To her delight, an obstacle students consistently overcame was getting onto the Internet. The rub: few did it from home. "They didn't have Internet access in their homes, but they found a place," says Lavergne-Friedman, now a social worker at Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Clinic. "Most of them had a family member or somebody in their building with a computer they used, or they went to the library."

PEW STUDY SHOWS SMALL DISPARITY

That trade-off in the area of minorities' access to the Internet was borne out in a study released Mar. 14 by the Pew Hispanic Center and the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

The good news is that while a smaller percentage of Latinos and non-Hispanic blacks are online than whites, the Internet is by no means leaving minority populations behind. More than half—56%—of Latino adults and 60% of non-Hispanic blacks go online, according to the study. That's compared to a 71% Internet-participation rate for non-Hispanic whites. Groups once considered at risk of isolation in an increasingly digital society are getting online—thanks to Internet-connected cell phones, access to friends and relatives with home computers, and, above all, computers in libraries (see [BusinessWeek.com](#), 8/19/03, "[The Digital Divide That Wasn't](#)").

What still eludes many, however, is the full, interactive Internet experience. For less-affluent minorities, particularly Latinos, the Web is still very much stuck at 1.0. Only 29% of Hispanics have home broadband connections, compared with 43% of whites and 31% of African Americans.

Instead of a digital divide, the U.S. has a "digital dimmer switch," says Pew associate director Susannah Fox. On one end of the spectrum are the more than 84 million users of the high-speed Internet connections available from providers such as AT&T ([T](#)), Comcast ([CMCSA](#)), and Verizon ([VZ](#)). These people can use broadband connections to post blogs, watch and share videos on Google's ([GOOG](#)) YouTube, spruce up News Corp. ([NWS](#)) MySpace pages, efficiently scan Yahoo! ([YHOO](#)) sites for news, and buy and sell through services such as Amazon ([AMZN](#)) and eBay ([EBAY](#)). On the opposite end is the steadily shrinking percentage of users who are not online and don't know anybody online—a group largely composed of people over 70, recent immigrants, and Americans without a high school education.

LIMITED BROADBAND ACCESS STIFLES CONTRIBUTIONS

Many Latinos and African Americans are somewhere in the middle. They often gain access to the Internet through a dial-up connection or via computers outside their home, and use it to check e-mail, search, and visit Web pages, according to Pew. But they don't build the pages themselves, says Fox. "Broadband users are shaping their online environment, not just using it," says Fox. "It is interesting to think about not only what Latinos are missing out on if they don't have this, but what the rest of the population is missing out on in terms of the content Latinos might be contributing to the Internet."

Internet access is influenced by wealth, education, and length of time in the U.S., says Fox. As a result, more Latinos and African Americans will undoubtedly increase their Internet participation as their average socioeconomic position improves. About 90% of college-educated adults, for example, regularly use the Internet, regardless of ethnicity and race. Participation should also increase as broadband costs come down as a result of increasing competition among service providers.

Among Latinos, there are also cultural differences inhibiting Internet use that could change over time, says Jorge Reina Schement, professor of communications at Penn State University and co-director of the Institute for Information Policy. For example, Latinos seem to prefer face-to-face communication, making some shun Internet commerce. As more people grow up with the Internet and become comfortable with online transactions, this preference may become less important.

HOW TO CLOSE THE GAP

However the dimmer switch is unlikely to turn all the way up for poorer minorities anytime soon. "Some of these gaps will get smaller, but the reliance on different information sources will be there for a long time," says Reina Schement.

In the meantime, companies must be sensitive to the fact that not everyone is online, he says. And government should recognize that, in many cases, people want and need Internet connections. Reina Schement believes the country must continue to invest in outfitting schools, libraries, and other public access points with computers. "As a public policy community, we need to continue to expand the reach of public libraries," says Schement. "For many, they are the only source of Internet access."

[Holahan](#) is a writer for *BusinessWeek.com* in New York.

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