

# Providing Access to the Web is Not Enough

March 30 2010, By Wendy Leopold

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Even among college freshmen and digital natives -- those young adults who grew up with the Internet -- higher-level Internet skills and more sophisticated Internet usage still strongly correspond to socioeconomic status, according to a new Northwestern University study.

The finding has important implications for the ambitious [National Broadband Plan](#) recently sent to Congress by the [Federal Communications Commission](#).

In other words, the differences between the connected versus those not online at all don't tell the full story of the digital divide, according to Northwestern researcher Eszter Hargittai.

"Spending billions of 'stimulus' dollars to wire the nation with [high-speed Internet access](#) alone will not ensure that all Americans have meaningful access to the Web," said Hargittai, associate professor of communication studies.

Hargittai's study in the current issue of [Sociological Inquiry](#) concludes that even with similar levels of Internet access, Internet know-how is not randomly distributed among members of the so-called Net Generation.

"To provide meaningful access, the program will have to also focus on Internet education and training," she added. "Providing infrastructure without offering training is a bit like giving people cars without providing driver's education."

A faculty associate at Northwestern's Institute for Policy Research, Hargittai has spent the last decade researching the social and policy implications of information technologies, particularly as they relate to [social inequality](#).

"Scholarly research on the Internet originally focused on the so-called 'digital divide,'" said Hargittai. "The assumption is that once everyone has access to the Internet, issues of inequality are solved."

Her own studies of Internet usage, however, find that students from lower [socioeconomic backgrounds](#) and female, African American and Hispanic students report significantly lower levels of Web know-how than their higher socioeconomic and white male peers.

"A federal infrastructure approach alone will not address the discrepancies in the benefits people can gain from Internet access," Hargittai said. "Even when we control for basic access and for number of years spent online, we find that people from different backgrounds vary in their Internet understanding and use."

Of the more than 1,000 college freshmen surveyed in the recent study, those with at least one parent with a graduate degree exhibited significantly higher-level Internet know-how than those whose parents had lower levels of education.

Other findings in Hargittai's study, titled Digital Na(t)ives? Variations in Internet Skills and Uses among Members of the "Net Generation," include the importance of having multiple locations to go online. That is, students who have Internet access at home, at school and other sites, such as at a friends' or family members' homes, also exhibit higher-level Internet know-how.

Hargittai's study was based on a 2009 survey of 1,060 freshmen at the

University of Illinois, Chicago, which, according to U.S. News & World Report, is one of the nation's most ethnically diverse universities.

Provided by Northwestern University

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