

For minorities, new 'digital divide' seen

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In this Dec. 22, 2010 photo, Ritmo Records owner Miguel Amador meets with customer Ramon Corona in one of his two stores in Camden, N.J. Five years ago, the majority of his revenue came from music CDs. Now his mobile device sales are up 50 percent from last year. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke)

(AP) -- When the personal computer revolution began decades ago, Latinos and blacks were much less likely to use one of the marvelous new machines. Then, when the Internet began to change life as we know it, these groups had less access to the Web and slower online connections placing them on the wrong side of the "digital divide."

Today, as mobile technology puts computers in our pockets, [Latinos](#) and blacks are more likely than the general population to access the Web by cellular phones, and they use their phones more often to do more things.

But now some see a new "[digital divide](#)" emerging with Latinos and blacks being challenged by more, not less, access to technology. It's

tough to fill out a job application on a cell phone, for example. Researchers have noticed signs of [segregation](#) online that perpetuate divisions in the physical world. And blacks and Latinos may be using their increased Web access more for entertainment than empowerment.

Fifty-one percent of Hispanics and 46 percent of blacks use their phones to access the Internet, compared with 33 percent of whites, according to a July 2010 Pew poll. Forty-seven percent of Latinos and 41 percent of blacks use their phones for e-mail, compared with 30 percent of whites. The figures for using social media like Facebook via phone were 36 percent for Latinos, 33 percent for blacks and 19 percent for whites.

A greater percentage of whites than blacks and Latinos still have broadband access at home, but laptop ownership is now about even for all these groups, after black laptop ownership jumped from 34 percent in 2009 to 51 percent in 2010, according to Pew.

Increased access and usage should be good things, right?

"I don't know if it's the right time to celebrate. There are challenges still there," says Craig Watkins, an associate professor at the University of Texas at Austin and author of "The Young and the Digital." He adds: "We are much more engaged, but now the questions turn to the quality of that engagement, what are people doing with that access."

For Tyrell Coley, engagement mostly means entertainment. In December, the 21-year-old New York City supermarket clerk launched a Twitter conversation about "(hash)femalesneedto." The number sign was a "hashtag" that allowed others to label their tweets and join the discussion.

Within a few hours, (hash)femalesneedto was the top trending topic on Twitter meaning more of the site's 17 million users were talking about it

than anything else. Most comments came from black users and focused on relationships, advising women to do things like "learn sex is not love" and "learn how to love themselves."

"There's always something happening on Twitter, some drama, people talking about something," says Coley. "Twitter is a great social network to kill time. When you're bored, get on Twitter. Next thing you know you'll be out of work or whatever. Twitter makes my day go by. That's why I'm on almost every day."

Coley is black, and so are most of his 3,756 Twitter followers. So are about 25 percent of all Twitter users, roughly double the percentage of blacks in the U.S. population, according to a February 2010 survey by Edison Research and Arbitron.

Many of Twitter's trending topics have been fueled by black tweets. Coley has been responsible for several (hash)youcantbeuglyand and (hash)dumbthingspeoplesay also sprang from his iPhone. He has a desktop computer at home, which he used to apply for his supermarket job. But he uses his phone for 80 percent of his online activity, which is usually watching hip-hop and comedy videos or looking for sneakers on eBay.

This trend is alarming to Anjuan Simmons, a black engineer and technology consultant who blogs, tweets and uses Facebook "more than my wife would like." He hopes that blacks and Latinos will use their increased Web access to create content, not just consume it.

"What are we doing with this access? Are we simply sending e-mail, downloading adult content, sending texts for late-night hookups?" Simmons says. "Or are we discussing ideas, talking to people who we would not normally be able to talk to?"

Simmons has made professional connections and found job opportunities through social media. But when he first started using Twitter, the first thing he looked for was other black faces to connect with.

"The African-American community has a built-in social layer," Simmons says. "We tend to see other African-Americans as family. Even if we haven't met someone, we often refer to other black people as `brothers' or `sisters.'

"The root of that probably goes back to slavery, how we had to have tight connections because the slave masters could easily break up families," he says. "We needed that sense of family really to protect ourselves during slavery and Jim Crow. That still is woven into, oddly, the fabric of black America to this day. And I think we see this social construct online."

Facebook and Internet access are what most of Miguel Amador's customers want when they enter his two stores in Latino neighborhoods in Camden, N.J. Five years ago, the majority of his revenue came from music CDs. Now his mobile device sales are up 50 percent from a year ago. His top seller is the MyTouch 4G phone, which costs \$499.

Amador immigrated from the Dominican Republic 20 years ago. He uses a laptop at home and a desktop in his store to run his business and update his two Facebook accounts. One account is for personal use he estimates that 75 percent of the people he knows are on Facebook and one is aimed at his customers.

He recognizes that mobile phones are more limited than computers: "Phones are more for entertainment right now. I don't want to use the word uneducated, but I don't think (customers) are 100 percent educated on what the Internet can do in your life. They just see you can have fun

on it."

"For the Latino community," he says, "people without Internet are missing about 65 percent of the opportunities in life."

Yet mobile Internet access may not be the great equalizer. Aaron Smith, a Pew senior research specialist, says there are obvious limitations on what you can do on a mobile device updating a resume being the classic example.

"Research has shown that people with an actual connection at home, the ability to go online on a computer at home, are more engaged in a lot of different things that people who rely on access from work, a friend's house, or a phone," Smith says.

For those Latinos with mobile access, their connections are often related to geography. "Most Latinos here want to communicate with each other, they have family in other places that they want to be connected to," Amador says. "And they want to be involved in the American community. They see everyone on TV talking about Facebook and Twitter, and they want what other Americans have."

Yet despite these forces pushing ethnic groups together online, Simmons has seen his social network expand. Only about half of his 2,834 Facebook friends are black, down from about 80 percent when he signed up in 2006.

The early days of the Internet were filled with visions of a Utopian space where race would disappear, famously captured by a 1993 New Yorker cartoon with one pooch sitting at a computer saying to another, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog."

But the reality has turned out much differently, says Peter Chow-White,

an assistant communications professor at Simon Fraser University and co-author of the forthcoming anthology "Race After the Internet." He says there is "absolutely" still a racial divide online, in terms of broadband access and the ability of blacks and Latinos to make their voices widely heard.

"As long as you have structural inequalities in society, you cannot expect to have anything less than that on the Internet," he says. "The Internet is not a separate space from the world, it's intricately connected to everyday life and social institutions."

That's what danah boyd found as she documented a form of "white flight" among teenagers from MySpace to Facebook in 2006-07.

A social media researcher for Microsoft and a fellow at Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society, boyd interviewed teens in 17 states and spent more than 2,000 hours observing online practices.

She found that black youth were more likely to be on MySpace, while whites were leaving what some called MySpace's "ghetto" environment for Facebook. Although few white teens explicitly said they were leaving MySpace to get away from blacks or Latinos, boyd said their comments were often closely tied to race and class.

"The higher castes of high school moved to Facebook," one 17-year-old told her. "It was more cultured, and less cheesy. The lower class usually were content to stick to MySpace."

These movements "reflected a reproduction of social categories that exist in schools throughout the United States. Because race, ethnicity and socio-economic status shape social categories, the choice between MySpace and Facebook became racialized," boyd wrote in an article to be published in "Race After the Internet."

Today, Facebook has eclipsed MySpace in popularity, and Facebook says that blacks are about 11 percent of all U.S. Facebook users. But no ethnic group has increased its [Facebook](#) usage more than [Hispanics](#), which went from about 3 percent to 9 percent of U.S. users since 2006, according to the site's own analysis.

Amador believes this trend, along with more Internet access in general, is speeding up the process of assimilation for Latinos by connecting them to their friends and families back home.

"When you're far away from something, you have a strong feeling for it, and you want it more," he says. "But now that we can get closer to those things, it makes us much more comfortable here."

Smith, the Pew researcher, says more research is needed to understand the implications of blacks and Latinos moving so quickly to mobile Web access, because this technology is changing the patterns of Internet use as profoundly as the shift from dial-up to broadband did over the past decade.

"Mobile is a totally different experience," he says. "It's a huge change when the gateway to information in the digital world is always with you."

More information: Facebook's ethnic demographics:
on.fb.me/h83kfF

danah boyd's study: bit.ly/hBKVli

Anjuan Simmons blog: bit.ly/e2UCll

Tyrell Coley on Twitter: bit.ly/hwNsnv

Craig Watkins' "The Young and the Digital": bit.ly/e2uFKP

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