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## True nature of 'digital divide' divides experts

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The Freedom Forum Online

03.17.00

ARLINGTON, Va. — Four technology watchers told librarians, journalists and policy makers about ways to close the digital divide between whites and minorities. But one said that there is no divide — citing the latest surveys showing it has virtually disappeared.

Distinct viewpoints emerged as to the real nature of information access now.

### It's all about wealth

The size of the gap between the percentage of whites and minorities who are plugged into the information economy shouldn't surprise anyone, Mark Lloyd, the executive director of the Civil Rights Forum on Communications Policy, told participants at yesterday's National Freedom of Information Day conference. It's just the latest in a history of economic gaps.



Photo by Scott Maclay

Mark Lloyd

"The digital divide is not new," he said. "We had the agricultural divide when our economy was based on agriculture. We had the industrial divide when our economy was based on ... industry." Now, with a technologically based economy, "it's not a surprise that we have the digital divide.

"And we will not solve the digital divide until we address the differences between rich and poor [and] how resources are allocated. The key issue is that, despite all the talk of growing wealth, the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. ... Our inequality of wealth is shameful."

While private companies' altruistic efforts — donating computers, etc. — have helped, "we need intensive, real government action" to get minorities connected to the Internet, Lloyd said.



Photo by Scott Maclay

Rick Weingarten

### It's all about quality

Just being connected won't solve the digital divide, said Rick Weingarten, director of the Office for Information Technology Policy at the American Library Association. Because the Net is "evolving upwards" — becoming exponentially more complex by the day — policy makers need to focus on "the quality of connectivity," he said.

Minorities not only need to be connected, but they also need to have the same high-speed access and complex information management skills that whites do, said Weingarten.

"Connectivity is only one element," he said. "We need to focus on the ability to navigate" and on "information literacy."

### It's all about image

Americans who are in a position to close the digital divide won't do so until they can put a face on the

problem, Penn State University's Jorge Schement said.

"Sixty-four years ago, FDR [told Americans that] a third of the nation was ill-clothed; a third was ill-housed; and a third was ill-fed." That image gave people everywhere an understanding of the depths of the Depression — even though they may not have experienced it themselves — and garnered support for federal action to solve the problem.



Photo by Scott Maclay  
Jorge Schement

"Our failing as Americans is that we imagine that the rest of the world is like people we know," Schement said. People to whom a home PC and a T1 line at work is a given can't imagine that there are those who have never touched a computer, he said.

People in low-income communities who don't have phones, who don't have computers, who have never even seen the Internet may be faceless and nameless to the wealthy and the middle class, but they are nonetheless 'people we should think about and be concerned about,' he said.

'FDR knew ... that America benefits when somebody can look out on a community and ... create an image that we could respond to.'

### **It's all about education**

Despite all the hand-wringing over the disparity in Internet access, 'the numbers quite clearly show that the digital divide ... is either not there or will not be there shortly,' The Freedom Forum's Adam Clayton Powell III said.

'Every survey we've seen in the last three months shows that the digital divide by gender and race has closed,' with the exception of Native Americans, said Powell, vice president/technology and programs.

He cited a study by Forrester Research showing that the number of plugged-in Hispanics is five percentage points above the number of whites. The number of African-Americans who are online is up 50% in one year, he said. 'And within comparable income bands, African-Americans have closed the gap,' Powell said.

Asian-Americans have reached a 'saturation level' of connectivity, with 74% of households are online.

Studies by Stanford University, and articles in *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times* and the *Christian Science Monitor*, all have concluded that the digital divide is 'largely a myth,' he said.



Photo by Scott Maclay  
Adam Clayton Powell III

But Powell did note that one factor makes a big difference — education. He called it the highest barrier to technology, rather than race or ethnicity, for many Americans. The chasm between the number of college-educated Net users and those with less than a high school education is gaping. 'So the digital divide is there — just not the way we think it is,' Powell said.