Digital Organizing Resource D:
The Digital Divide in Community Organizing

This resource is part of a suite of publications based on a study of digital organizing that was conducted by the Research Hub for Youth Organizing at the University of Colorado Boulder and commissioned by The Colorado Trust, to support the digital organizing work of the Building and Bridging Power strategy grantee partners. Data comes from interviews with ten organizing groups and a review of available literature. Go to our website for more information.

Applications are not the only digital tool used by community organizers. Across the interviews and the literature, there is significant discussion about the role of digital devices (computers, tablets, mobile phones), the Internet, and internet access.

Devices are the digital technology you can touch. Twenty years ago, the primary digital device was the desktop computer, or a high-end laptop. Since then, devices, or digital hardware, are constantly evolving. Affordable devices like mobile phones, Chromebooks, tablets, and laptops have also significantly expanded access. Even with notable inequalities, mobile phones are more accessible than ever.

Whereas the "digital divide" was often discussed as the growing gap between those who could access computers and the internet (the wealthy, middle-class Americans living in urban and suburban areas) and those who could not (under-resourced members of society, the poor, rural, elderly, and disabled portions of America's populations)[a], the digital divide has more to do with access to the Internet.[1] The Internet or Web is the infinite space that holds the digital global information network.

Internet access by design is a utility for which payment is required. Whether purchased through a mobile device contract, wired, or paid for via wireless or satellite contracts between individuals and a company, or provided by a local government, the Internet costs money to access. Not every community has equal access to reliable internet services. As the Internet emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000, it was less profitable to run hundreds of miles of physical cable into rural parts of the country that served a very small number of customers. Many under-resourced neighborhoods were left unwired. While there was government intervention in some places, the true transformation took place when Wi-Fi, cable, satellite, and cellular access became commonplace.

Adults in rural areas have seen a rise in home broadband adoption since 2016, but they remain less likely than adults in suburban areas to have home broadband and less likely than urban adults to own a smartphone, tablet

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[a] This definition was borrowed from a project on addressing the digital divide by Stanford students. For a more detailed description go to https://cs.stanford.edu/people/eroberts/cs181/projects/digital-divide/start.html

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computer or traditional computer.[2] According to Pew survey responses , rural residents also go online less frequently than their urban counterparts. This is due to the current infrastructure that does not support consistently dependable broadband access in many rural areas. Broadband provides high speed internet access via multiple types of technologies including fiber optics, wireless, cable, DSL, and satellite. During the pandemic, the move to remote work and school brought the lack of reliable high-speed internet access to the forefront for school districts and other public serving institutions and organizations who work directly with rural communities. As schools, organizations and companies went virtual, they were forced to provide devices to students and families, but other organizations and companies have been under no obligation to do this. There is no clear path to systematically addressing issues of access to devices and high-speed internet access.

In this study, community organizers reported that acquiring devices is less of a problem than having access to tools that work reliably and that have the adequate memory, power, and ability to connect to the necessary apps for organizing. Some organizers are faced with Chromebooks with limited battery power, or old operating systems that make it hard to connect to the Internet. Reliable internet access continues to be a challenge for rural communities and low-income neighborhoods due to connectivity issues and hardware problems. This means community organizers need to be strategic in how they communicate and work with their base in relation to devices and technology.

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Endnotes

[1] *Some digital divides persist between rural, urban and suburban America*. Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (August 19, 2021) https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/06/10/blacklivesmatter-surges-on-twitter-after-george-floyds-death/

[2] *Some digital divides persist between rural, urban and suburban America*. Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (August 19, 2021) https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/06/10/blacklivesmatter-surges-on-twitter-after-george-floyds-death/

[3] *Social media use in 2021*. Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (April 7, 2021) https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/04/07/social-media-use-in-2021/

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