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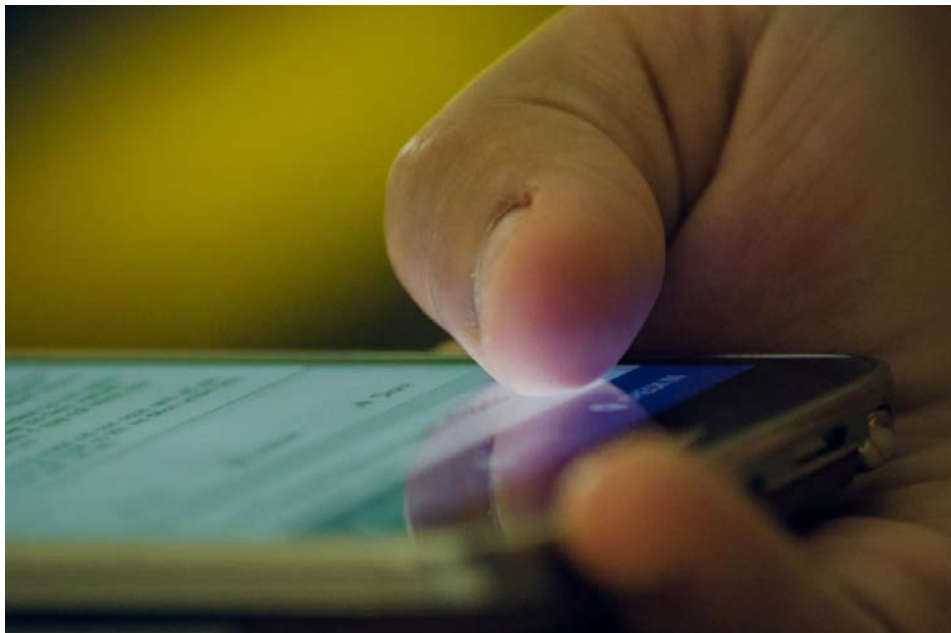
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The 'Smartphone Only' Problem

Internet access among Latinos in the United States has increased considerably over the past six years, but the quality of that access remains a critical issue.

By Rick Paulas



(Photo: 126915310@No8/Flickr)

In Internet terms, the year 2009 occurred lifetimes ago. “David After Dentist” was the hot meme sensation, Twitter just began proving that 140 characters were more than enough for most, and podcasts were some weird thing only the mightiest of nerds downloaded.

It was also a different era in terms of who was online in America. The population skewed pretty young, with more than 50 percent of American Internet users under 44 years old. Racially, it was mixed: 80 percent of whites

said “they use the Internet”), 72 percent of the black population used it, and the Latino population lagged behind. In 2009, only 64 percent of Latinos in the United States used the Internet.

Now, the percentage of U.S. Latinos who say they use the Internet is higher than the percentage of the U.S. black population who say they do: 84 to 81 percent.

A new study by Pew Research shows that a lot has changed in six years. Now, the percentage of U.S. Latinos who say they use the Internet is higher than the percentage of the U.S. black population who say they do: 84 to 81 percent. During that same span, the percentage of immigrant Latinos using the Internet rose from 51 to 78 percent.

This dramatic shift can be attributed largely to a few different factors. For starters, public libraries. A 2015 Pew study found that 83 percent of U.S.-born Latinos use libraries. “[Public libraries] were an important way in which Hispanic immigrants used technology,” says Mark Lopez, director of Hispanic Research for Pew, and one of the study’s authors. “They actually go in and ask for help to do things on a computer, and that includes everything from filling out a job application to looking at information to accessing the Internet.”

But the largest factor shrinking the U.S. Latino digital divide has been the Internet access points they can hold in their palms.

“The availability of mobile devices has been a big [reason],” Lopez says.

Lopez’s conclusion fits in with previous data examining the closing digital divide among Latinos. In 2013, Pew found that, as mobile phone ownership went up in the U.S. Latino population, so did the number that said they used the Internet. It’s not the most shocking of findings. Drops in smartphone pricing have allowed their adoption to skyrocket, providing people with more potential access points.

But the unique relationship that mobile phone use has had in getting more U.S. Latinos to use the Internet hints at a potential problem. Sure, a larger portion of the Latino population may be using the Internet now than in 2009,

but that doesn't mean the access is equivalent to how whites are traversing the Web.

"Latinos are less likely to own a computer at home than whites, and more likely to be smartphone-dependent," Lopez says.

This means that, for a large section of the U.S. Latino population, smartphones are the *only* access point they have to get onto the Internet. The white population, meanwhile, is more likely to have a smartphone *and* personal home computers. While access is access, there's a huge difference between navigating the Web on a personal computer and navigating on a phone, just as there's a huge difference between rabbit ear antennas and high-definition digital.

Of California's Spanish-speaking Latino population, 69 percent have access to broadband Internet in their home but only 39 percent connect to the Internet using a "home computing device."

Declaring a "narrowing" to the Latino digital divide, then, seems like false hope. Rather, it seems one problem is simply being traded in for another.

This dissonance between perception and reality was evident in a recent poll from the independent research corporation *Field Poll* looking at California's digital divide. It found that 84 percent of Californians now have high-speed Internet at home, up 9 percent since 2014. On the surface, this suggests that the divide is narrowing, but a deeper examination of the data leaves the picture murkier.

A huge chunk of the rise was due, once again, to the proliferation of the smartphone. This, in itself, isn't a problem. But the poll also showed that the percentage of Californians who accessed their home Internet by *only* using a smartphone nearly doubled, from 8 to 14 percent, over the past two years. Even *Field Poll* pointed out the problems with this:

While this is enabling more to get online, these users have more limited functionality when connecting to the Internet than those connecting from a

desktop, laptop or tablet computer. In addition, some smart phone users face limitations in data access based on their monthly cell phone plans.

Further along in the report, they examine the state's Spanish-speaking Latino population. While 69 percent have access to broadband Internet in their home, only 39 percent connect to the Internet using a "home computing device."

The main factor cited for not having home computers was cost, proving how effective the phone industry has been in angling their sales pitch: You can buy a laptop for around \$250, while, according to a study by CNN Money, the "most affordable" smartphone plans cost around \$1,200 for two years.

It leaves us in a strange spot when trying to figure out where non-profits and the government are at in working to close the access divide. More people than ever before are connected. But until data collection considers home broadband Internet accessed from a home computer in different terms than Internet that's accessed only from a smartphone, the positive reports need more context. Things are better than they were, but not as good as they seem.

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