

Horrigan: Stop Using ‘Digital Divide’ Phrase

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National broadband expert and independent consultant John Horrigan suggested in a Board of Experts of a recent California Emerging Technology Fund (CETF) meeting that the public and private sector stop using the phrase “digital divide,” arguing that the issue is less about access to hardware and more about the skills to use them.

“Fewer people are not online than a half dozen years ago,” Horrigan said in a follow-up interview with Techwire. “That doesn’t mean efforts to bring the ‘not online’ into the columns of Internet users should stop. But focusing on the ‘online/not online’ issue as the main digital equity problem obscures a larger and looming one — differences in levels of digital skills for the online and offline population.”

Instead, Horrigan prefers the term “digital readiness.”

“The emerging challenge is about who’s ready and not ready to be online,” Horrigan said. “We need to build a user’s digital skills and trust, and we must cultivate ‘digital readiness’ and capacity for all users to go online.

Since 1998, the percentage of Americans using the Internet has jumped from 36 percent to 85 percent in 2013; 70 percent of Americans have broadband in their homes and 56 percent use smartphones.

However, according to data from the CETF, certain groups still have relatively low levels of broadband and smartphone adoption, including blacks, Latinos, those with high school degrees or less and senior citizens.

There are multiple barriers that affect how many Americans get online, including cost, relevance in their lives and digital literacy. Since cost is not the only issue keeping people from using broadband and smartphones, Horrigan said that using cost incentives as the only way to help people adopt broadband is too little.

“‘Digital Readiness’ refers to helping people to acquire skills to use online applications that are going to become more consequential (e.g., telemedicine, education) but also (with the advent of the ‘Internet of things’) more daunting for some people,” Horrigan said. “Higher levels of Digital Readiness can accelerate the uptake of new application.”

Despite his criticism of the term “digital divide,” Horrigan praised programs at the meeting that have been focusing on reducing the divide by helping with both cost and education, including Comcast’s Internet Essentials, Connect2Compete (now renamed EveryoneOn) and the NTIA Broadband Adoption toolkit.

Also helping to increase Internet use, Horrigan said, are community organizations, the Federal Communications Commission and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) broadband grants.

Horrigan said he would continue to give talks distinguishing “digital divide” and “digital readiness,” but was unsure of what the future venues would be.

California Public Utilities Commissioner Catherine Sandoval disagreed with Horrigan’s advocacy of retiring the phrase “digital divide” and focusing less on access and more on adoption strategies. She said Horrigan apparently had not been to far Northern California or the Eastern Sierra areas.

“There, the issue is very much an access issue,” Sandoval said at a CPUC Counsel meeting on Oct. 28, noting middle mile access is lacking in these northern areas. She touted a recent CPUC CASF decision bringing new broadband access to the Yurok tribe in the Humboldt and Del Norte areas.