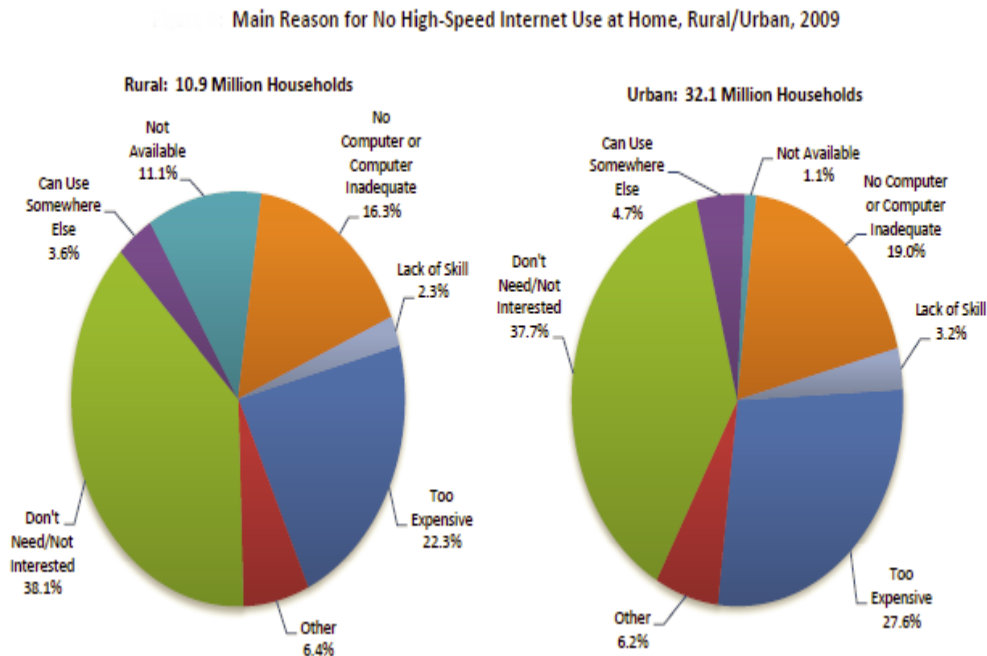


Understanding the Mobile Lives of Black and Latino Youth

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Over the last few weeks I've been speaking with various researchers, journalists, and industry about some of the remarkable shifts that are happening in the mobile space. While much of the news regarding mobile media this year has been about the release of Apple's iPad and iPhone 4, another story has gone largely unnoticed: the growing use of the mobile web by young African Americans and Latinos.

I addressed the shifting contours of the digital divide in an earlier post (see, [Changing the Conversation: Rethinking America's Digital Divide](#)) but the data continues to suggest that young African Americans and Latinos have thoroughly embraced mobile phones and the mobile web. There are several reasons for this but let me note two in particular. First, we know that black and Latino youth are much more likely than their white and Asian counterparts to grow up in households without broadband internet.

A 2009 report by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) titled, "[Digital Nation: 21st Century America's Progress Toward Universal Broadband Internet Access](#)," found that broadband households tend to be younger, white or Asian, highly-educated, married, and with higher incomes. Conversely, households without broadband tend to be older, black or Latino, less educated, low incomes, and under employed. Here are reasons given by the latter households for not having broadband.

The primary reasons are “don’t need/not interested” and “too expensive.” In all likelihood black and Latino kids live in homes that can not afford the internet versus homes that are simply not interested. When you consider the fact that black and Latino households have been hit especially hard by the economic recession, broadband internet service may be viewed as a luxury rather than a necessity.

A second factor that explains the rush to mobile among black and Latino youth is that much of teen culture and social life, in general, has shifted to the mobile media space. According to Amanda Lenhart of the Pew Internet & American Life Project 75% of 12-17 year-olds own a mobile phone. In their report [Teens and Mobile Phones](#) Lenhart and her colleagues also report that girls (77%) and boys (74%) are relatively equal in terms of phone ownership. There is a small degree of disparity in terms of race and ethnicity with 78% of whites, 75% of blacks, and 68% of Latinos (that includes both English-and-Spanish speaking) owning mobile phones. To the extent that black and Latino youth live disproportionately in homes without broadband the opportunities to experience the kinds of social media activities they prefer from a home computer are not great. The mobile, in this environment, as I told Omar has become the “default gateway” to the online world for many black and Latino teens.

Demographics of teen cell phone users

The percentage of teens in each demographic group who have a cell phone

		% of teens
Total teens		75%
Boys		74
Girls		77
Age		
12-13		66%
14-17		80
Race/ethnicity		
White, Non-Hispanic		78%
Black, Non-Hispanic		75
Hispanic (English- and Spanish-speaking)		68
Household income		
Less than \$30,000/yr		59%
\$30,000-\$49,999		76
\$50,000-\$74,999		73
\$75,000+		87

Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, Teens and Mobile Phones Survey conducted from June 26 - September 24, 2009. N=800 teens ages 12-17 and the margin of error is $\pm 4\%$.



What do we know about the mobile lives of black and Latino youth? Much of the evidence suggests that in many instances they are not signing up for long-term contracts. Rather, they are opting to use pre-paid carriers. This reflects a number of factors including, for example, intermittent employment, a limited social network, and distinct circumstances and motivations for using mobile technology.

Whatever the reasons there is a growing effort to service tech users in low income households with affordable mobile devices, rate plans, and services, according to some of the industry people I have been speaking with. Recently, I shared an interesting conversation with Omar Gallaga, the technology reporter for the *Austin American Statesman*. Omar was working on a piece about the digital divide titled, [Can Mobile Phones Narrow the Digital Divide?](#) Omar reports that some of the more established carriers like At&T, Verizon, and Sprint are beginning to offer pre-paid packages or lower rate data plans. Why?

They have likely seen the reports that show the enormous amount of data black and Latino youth are using via their mobile. In a recent conversation with a VP from a mobile carrier the data generated by her company regarding the use of mobile by black and Latino youth was stunning. Another industry person acknowledged that his company was rethinking its entire mobile strategy based on the data use trends that they were viewing. Much of the data consistently acknowledges that black and Latino youth are extraordinarily active when it comes to using their mobile phones to social network with their peers, play games, listen to music, and watch video.

There is a lot to learn about the use of mobile media technologies by young people on the social and economic margins. We are beginning to get a portrait of the networked lives of black youth and Latino youth. The more interesting questions at this point are primarily sociological. How is their new media ecology evolving? How have they embraced the mobile phone as the hub of their social, informational, and cultural life? What kinds of mobile experiences are they afforded via the carriers who now see them as a viable market? What are the social, educational, and cultural implications of their engagement with mobile?

We will be offering our own observations and insights related to these questions in the forthcoming weeks and months.