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Connect Us One and All

The "digital divide" is alive and well and still results in marginalization

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Last Monday was Cyber Monday, the largest online shopping day of the year. According to USA Now, USA TODAY, December 2nd, 2014) more than one hundred million shoppers spent, on average, more 124 dollars per order. Clearly Cyber Monday has become an American Cultural institution. Reports comparing Black Friday with Cyber Monday indicate that there appears to be a shift away from overcrowded shopping malls to online shopping. Nielsen suggests 46 percent of consumers will shop online on Cyber Monday, up 16 percent from last year's figures. The same report indicates that a growing number of people do not plan to participate in the Black Friday shopping frenzy. Crowded stores are giving way to shopping from the comfort of ones living room. Cyber Monday is even becoming more popular among older shoppers. The number of online shoppers between 50 and 64 increased 40 %

and those over 65 increased 20 % ([baby-boomers-drive-cyber-monday-growth](#)).

Participation in this new cultural institution is not an option for all Americans. Shopping patterns are influenced by many factors, economics, [gender](#), age, and [ethnicity](#). The number of people having access to the Internet is growing, but the “digital divide” is still very much a reality. Last week as I walked to my local library to check out a novel to read over the thanksgiving holiday, I could not help noticing a line of people of all ages waiting for 30 minutes of online access. There are those of us who are lucky enough to have Internet access at home; we are able to get online at any time of the day or night; should we wish to participate in recent cultural phenomena such as cyber Monday; we are not limited to our allotted computer time at the local library.

The “digital divide” is term referring to those who have access to technology and those who do not; technological connections includes cell phones, TV’s, personal computers, and access to the Internet. Lack of access results in a degree of isolation and marginalization, it leaves those not connected, usually elders, immigrants, minority; those living in poverty disconnected and increases their potentially disadvantaged position in society.

By all indications the situation is improving. An increasing number of older and minority adults, groups previously marginalized by a lack of access to technology, are now connected at least via cell phones. Many of the men and women waiting to use a computer outside my local library; were either texting or had cell phones bulging out of their pockets. They represent a new digital divide; individuals who have some connectivity via cell phone but do not have ongoing access to a computer. Many older Americans, especially those who are over 75 and poor do not use computers. Many poor immigrant and minority individuals of all ages who do not have access to computers, the situation can be extremely problematic. For example, 44 % of African American and Hispanic adults have cell phones; unfortunately these men and women cannot conduct many of their affairs with their cell phones. Filling out job applications, completing insurance forms, making travel arrangements, most of these necessitate a computer; they require forms generally not accessible via cell phone.

There are also still millions of Americans who are offline. Households without connections are likely to be more disadvantaged with regard to health care, employment opportunities, educational opportunities, and even entertainment. Six out of 10 households who have an income below 25 thousand do not have

internet access at home. Between 50 and 60 percent of African Americans and Hispanics do not have Internet. The number of older Hispanics and African Americans who are not “connected” is even higher (nytimes.com/opinion/sunday/internet-access-and-the-new-divide).

My friend William Saunders, a 61 year old African American, is an example of someone who has worked hard all of his life managing to make ends meet. He now finds himself increasingly marginalized. His increasing feelings of marginalization, he says, come partially from his inability to manage new technological devices. As Katherine S. Newman who described the lives of older African Americans, Dominicans, and Puerto Ricans living in poverty in American cities states in her book, “A different shade of gray” William Saunders presents a portrait of someone who lives life increasingly on the margins. He has worked hard all of his life but now in later life, he cannot afford a computer, internet access, he is even considering dropping his Cable TV, something that gives him great pleasure, because he cannot afford it. Millions of Americans, like William Saunders cannot afford access. These millions of Americans cannot shop on cyber Monday, they may not even be able to watch the thanksgiving parade or ball games if they cannot afford cable or dish TV.