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Pew study finds rapid increase in mobile Internet use by low-income Americans

Experts say mobile Web is still less of an equalizer than a bridge for lower-income groups

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Wireless access to the Internet has long been seen as a potential economic bridge for disadvantaged groups in those regions of the world that lack a wired infrastructure.

For example, in poorer countries like Haiti, where landlines are limited, three mobile service providers have moved to widely offer the ability for cell phone users to complete [wireless banking and e-commerce](#) transactions.

Some observers note that low-income groups in the U.S. can also gain profound benefits from wireless access by using some key applications.

This week, the Pew Research Center in Washington said that a survey of 2,252 adults over 18 in April and May found that low-income groups in the U.S. are now the fastest adopters mobile Web devices.

The survey found that 46% of households earning less than \$30,000 a year are wireless Internet users. That lowest income group surveyed was the fastest growing -- up by 11 percentage points from 35% in April 2009.

Pew did note that the lower-income group still uses wireless Internet technology less than higher income groups. For instance, some 80% of households in the highest income group, those earning more than \$75,000 a year, are now using wireless Internet technologies, up from 72% a year earlier.

Pew also said that nearly two-thirds of African-Americans (64%) and English-speaking Latinos (63%) are wireless Internet users, while 57% of White Americans say they are using the technology. All three groups showed an increase in wireless Internet use over last year.

For the study, Pew defined Wireless Internet use as going online using a laptop either via Wi-Fi or cellular, using an e-mail system or using the Web or instant messaging services on a cell phone.

The Pew study also found that African-American and Hispanic groups do more texting, Web browsing, e-mailing and instant messaging than White uses. About 87% of the African-Americans



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Which is the best security strategy over next two years?

- Allow local management of security where possible
- Centralize control of end points, enforce compliance and restrict types of devices that connect to network
- Use private cloud designs with access control to lower storage of data on PCs and laptops
- A combination of all of the above

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and the same percentage of Hispanics own a cell phone, compared to 80% of the White respondents, Pew said.

Pew also noted that minority users are more likely than White users to use social networking sites, watching videos, post a video or purchase a product on a cell phone.

While the survey results are fairly clear about increased use of the wireless Internet by minorities in the U.S., some observers said the survey doesn't analyze whether use of the technologies leads to improved circumstances.

"With an increased use of wireless, we need to develop services and programs that will bring relevant and localized resources and tools that will help people find jobs, manage their budgets, etc., on mobile devices," said Carol Gregory, a spokeswoman for One Economy Corp., a non-profit group in Washington devoted to finding ways to use technology to help solve socioeconomic problems.

Gregory added that wireless can be a powerful mechanism for delivering online content, and One Economy is working on a technology training program for youth called Wireless Digital Connectors that will include classes on wireless application development.

The group also has created the Social Innovation Lab for software developers to create "public purpose applications" to help users find jobs, manage budgets, do homework, manage their healthcare and find emergency services, she said.

Jack Gold, an analyst at J. Gold Associates said there are always going to be inherent limitations with wireless Internet access, especially from a handheld device, when compared to a desktop computer over a fast Internet connection. Most users on a handheld will work in short spurts, while a knowledge worker might rely on a large monitor and desktop computer for hours of research at a time.

"The phone is not going to be adequate for intensive instruction, but can be useful to a farmer in rural India who has very different needs about his crops and the weather," Gold said.

In that sense, he and others said, it might be incorrect to call the mobile Internet a great equalizer, but something more like a potential bridge to a better way of life.

Separately, the CTIA wireless association called the Pew study an argument in favor of cutting wireless taxes and increasing use of the federal Universal Service Fund for expansion of wireless networks and services in inner cities and other underserved areas.

The Federal Communications Commission is currently considering reform of the USF.

"Wireless is the communications mode of choice by all populations but also underserved populations, and shouldn't government policy recognize that?" said John Walls, vice president of public affairs at CTIA, which represents the major wireless carriers and manufacturers in the U.S.

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