

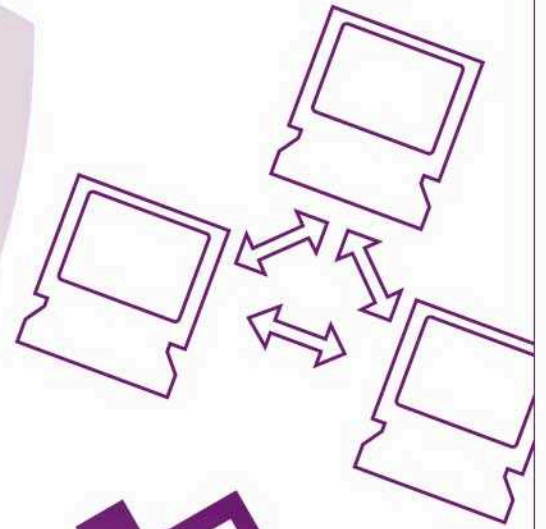
LATINO INTERNET CONTENT STUDY:

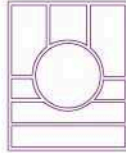
Findings
from
Focus
Group
Sessions

New York & Los Angeles



The Tomás Rivera
POLICY INSTITUTE





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Founded in 1985, the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute advances critical, insightful thinking on key issues affecting Latino communities through objective, policy-relevant research, and its implications, for the betterment of the nation.

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New York & Los Angeles

New York

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Los Angeles

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Gratefully,

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Executive Summary

How do Latinos use the Internet and why don't more of them use it? These and other questions were the subject of focus groups convened in Los Angeles and New York by the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute. This study distills their responses on issues concerning Latinos and the Internet, including Web content, community needs and the obstacles to Internet access. At issue is the so-called "Digital Divide": the gap between those with access to network technology and those without it.

Focus group participants offered the following recommendations to bridge the Digital Divide:

- Educate Latinos about the Internet, how to use it, and its relevance to them.
- Create content in English and Spanish specifically for the Latino community.
- Provide free Internet access.
- Provide free or low-cost computers, either at home or in public centers.

The study reveals much about Latino Internet use. Both users and non-users alike said that they were well aware of the Internet's offerings, particularly e-

mail, research information and e-commerce, as well as news, entertainment, shopping and other diversions. Participants said they especially valued the Internet's ability to facilitate communications and access to information. Participants also said they relied on the Web to buy products and obtain company information, though online purchasing habits varied.

The chief obstacles to Internet access remain the lack of computer hardware and software, the cost of Internet service and connection fees, and the lack of

Internet skills among Latinos. Of less importance is the lack of Latino-oriented Internet content. It is only after Latinos gain access that the availability of Latino content becomes important to enhancing and maintaining the Internet experience.

But focus group participants who use the Internet did say they wanted the ability to choose between

Spanish- and English-language options on the Web, for personal reasons and because they felt that such options would help the Latino population in general. They also favored Web content relevant to their own communities.

The focus groups also revealed Latinos' fears and misconceptions about the Internet. Some participants expressed intimidation because of their weak English-language skills or their lack of technical knowledge.





Introduction

Estimates of Latino Internet access vary significantly, but Latino Internet use and computer ownership have grown significantly. Nevertheless, the Digital Divide remains a stark reality for the Latino community in the United States.^{1,2}

The Digital Divide separates Internet users from non-users based on education, income, geography and race and ethnicity. Those on the disadvantaged side of the divide often live in low-income communities. Socioeconomic status and educational achievement are strongly correlated with home computer ownership and Internet use.

The Tomás Rivera Policy Institute (TRPI) has conducted research to understand the factors that contribute to the gap in access to technology. Previous studies suggest that one such factor may be the Internet's lack of useful Latino content: community-relevant, culturally sensitive and Spanish-language Web sites. The presumption is that Latinos who do not find Internet content that reflects their perspectives, culture and needs will be less likely to take advantage of the Internet's wealth of information and services.

To explore this presumption, the TRPI convened focus groups in Los Angeles and New York to understand how Latinos use the Internet, what content exists and whether that content meets Latino community needs.

Four focus groups in both cities addressed the following questions:

- What are the predominant uses of the Internet by Latinos?
- How is the Internet used for e-mail, educational and research purposes, price comparison and e-commerce, and entertainment?
- How important is culturally relevant and Spanish-language content?
- Why do Latinos not access the Internet?
- Is there a lack of or perceived lack of Latino content on the Internet?
- If so, does this lack of or perceived lack of Latino content account for the lower take-up rate of Internet access among Latinos?

Among the key findings:

- The lack of computer hardware and software, the cost of Internet service and the lack of technical skills are the chief obstacles to greater Latino access.
- Many Latino non-users expressed fear and misconceptions about the Internet, as well as intimidation because of their weak English-language skills or lack of technical knowledge.
- Latinos who use the Internet would like the ability to choose between English and Spanish languages and would like to see more content relevant to their communities.
- Though Latino-oriented Internet content is not a primary factor in increasing access, it is nevertheless important to Latinos once they have found their way onto the Internet.

¹ The Tomás Rivera Policy Institute. "Closing the Digital Divide: Enhancing Hispanic Participation in the Information Age." 1998.

² Department of Commerce. "Falling Through the Net: Toward Digital Inclusion." 2000.



Findings

Exploring the World: Latino Use of the Internet

To address the first two research questions of this study, we queried both Internet users and non-users. Each of the focus group discussions began with consideration of the various actual and potential reasons for accessing the Internet. Participants in the Internet user groups were given the opportunity to list the specific activities for which they use the Internet, while non-Internet users were invited to cite how they would use the Internet if they had access.

Overall, the findings indicate that both Internet users and non-users were very much aware of the variety of functions of the Internet. Respondents mentioned shopping and entertainment, but both Los Angeles and New York discussions in general pointed to communications, access to information and research as the most important uses. Several concerns for Internet users remain, however, including e-commerce privacy and security.

Latino Internet users in both Los Angeles and New York said they used the Internet for a variety of purposes, primarily e-mail and information gathering and to a lesser extent, news, entertainment and shopping.

Internet users reported accessing a variety of Web sites, from popular culture to research. This included generic to Latino-specific sites. The variety and sophistication in the responses about Internet use reflected a high degree of proficiency and comfort with the Internet. With various degrees of experience, the Internet users were highly confident and serious. They use the Internet to access information for research, education, entertainment, leisure and other purposes. The Internet seemed to form an

integral part of their daily life. Participants in two Internet user focus groups in New York said they used the Internet for a variety of different reasons.

All of the users in both Los Angeles and New York said they used the Internet for e-mail. Some used e-mail to subscribe to or to disseminate newsletters. Some New York respondents said they used e-mail to communicate with class members and to solicit funds for work.

“ I primarily use the Internet for e-mail and to look for other sources of free access to the Internet, and jobs. To buy things. ... I do a lot of shopping, especially for travel. ”

Los Angeles respondent

Respondents in Los Angeles said they frequently used e-mail as a way to save money on long-distance domestic and international telephone calls to family and friends. Many participants expressed great satisfaction with the resulting cost benefits and convenience.

“ I’ve saved a lot of money. ... I have been able to e-mail back and forth without spending any money, so it has been really great. ”

Los Angeles respondent

Beyond e-mail, some Latino Internet users said they had chatted online. Six participants in Los Angeles focus groups said they had accessed chat rooms. Some no longer did, while others occasionally participated in chat rooms. Chatting was not a primary Internet activity for any respondents. Participants’ experiences with chatting varied. A few participants said they were initially fascinated by chatting, even to the point of overuse.



“When I first got my computer I felt trapped. I fell victim to the chat rooms, and I literally would spend 12 hours a day in chat rooms. ... I told all of my friends, and [they said], ‘Don’t worry; we did it too. It’s a phase you go through.’ And then I popped out of it when I realized how much time I was wasting. ... I had girlfriends in Puerto Rico [whom] I would never talk to or meet [laughs], ... but I really felt connected. ... The fascination of knowing that I was in touch with people all over the world. ... I felt like I was landing on the moon, ...a whole new frontier. ... But then I got practical about it.”

Los Angeles respondent

Respondents in both Los Angeles and New York frequently said they used the Internet to find information, both for personal use and for work. Several participants said they downloaded research articles and scientific information as part of their work. Others reported using the Internet for research at school.

“It enables me to work from home, because I can e-mail clients [and] do a lot of the research. ... I can find maps, all kinds of things.”

Los Angeles respondent

“I work for a software servicing firm, which primarily recruits people for computer jobs. So [I] do a lot of research at work, looking up different companies, trying to find people [who] are looking for jobs in the computer field.”

New York respondent

“Right now I’m looking for a new job, so I use [the Internet] as a job search [tool]. Also I’m looking for an apartment. ... Also for gathering information on health issues or topics that I’m curious about.”

New York respondent

At least four respondents in New York and one in Los Angeles said that they worked with the Internet, creating or maintaining Web sites.

“I’m tracking a Web site of my organization. I’m the one who keeps everybody in the organization informed on whatever is going on. ... I’m the only one who knows how to use it.”

New York respondent

Respondents in Los Angeles and New York also said they turned to the Internet for news. In Los Angeles, respondents frequently said they consulted the Los Angeles Times, New York Times and CNN Web sites. In New York, respondents frequently cited the New York Times.

In both cities, not surprisingly, respondents also mentioned their interest in accessing news and current events about Latinos in the United States and about Latin America. Almost half of the New York focus group respondents mentioned that they consulted Web sites with news from and about Latin America and Latinos: “Web sites related to Latin America,” “Web sites about Spanish people in the United States, Latinos,” “newspapers from South America, Spain” and “anything dealing with Mexico.”³ Both Los Angeles and New York respondents said they enjoyed reading news from sources other than U.S.-based newspapers or conventional

³ The Tomás Rivera Policy Institute. “Closing the Digital Divide: Enhancing Hispanic Participation in the Information Age.” 1998.



newspapers because they believe their coverage of world news, including Latin America, is often very narrow. One New York focus group of younger second-generation Latinos expressed less interest in Latin American news than another group comprised of respondents with stronger ties to Latin America. But both groups of respondents said they were interested in Web sites with Latin American news.

“ CNN en Español for example ... is very rich and actually provides more information about Latin America in Spanish than English. ”

Los Angeles respondent

“ I also go on the Internet to read the newspaper, the New York Times; the Spanish newspapers; and [to] access things overseas that I may not have access [to] here, like the newspaper in the Dominican Republic. ”

New York respondent

In both Los Angeles and New York, Internet user focus groups said they also made use of e-commerce for work and personal reasons. From shopping to entertainment, respondents seemed to appreciate being able to carry out these tasks expediently from their computers. Some New York respondents said they used the Internet to check stock rates and arrange travel.

“ I buy. I buy quite a bit. It's so convenient for me. I'm a single mom, and, you know, I'm in 20 places at one time. I started out buying books through Amazon.com. ”

Los Angeles respondent

“ A lot of e-commerce, personal and business. I have to buy stuff for clients, and it's easy to do it online without going out and spending an hour shopping for a client. I just purchase it online and they get it directly. ”

New York respondent



There was no consensus among Los Angeles or New York respondents about buying things online. Some were reluctant

and others were only

beginning to

engage in it,

but others had

been purchasing

online for some

time. When asked if

users had ever

made a purchase

through the Internet,

11

of 21 Los Angeles participants answered that they had previously made a purchase, and that they had a positive experience. Ten of the 11 participants who had previously made purchases said that they would make a purchase through the Internet again. Some respondents expressed less enthusiasm and more caution and were skeptical about making purchases on the Internet.

Some respondents expressed fears about the security of Internet transactions. A credit card scandal came up in more than one New York focus group interview. Internet security was mentioned in all four Los Angeles focus groups. One Los Angeles participant who previously made Internet purchases stated that it was very unlikely she would be making future purchases due to "the hackers." Many Los Angeles participants were also concerned with privacy issues, fearing the misuse of personal information.



“ I won’t [make purchases because] I don’t know who’s behind these companies; I don’t know who’s on the other end reading the information. ”

Los Angeles respondent

“ I could register [a Web site domain name] paymemoney.com, and ... you send me your credit card number, and I could collect and collect and never send you anything back. So I think the security is the issue. ”

Los Angeles respondent

Shopping is one of the more sophisticated activities that develops in the later stages of Internet use as people become more comfortable with the technology. Because of security and privacy issues, many participants said that they use the Internet as a source for price comparison and product information, but do not make purchases online.

The reluctance to shop online may also be linked with the inability to scrutinize products for quality over the Internet. Several participants in both the Internet user and non-Internet user focus groups discussed their desire to see and feel products before they buy.

“ Lately I’ve been using it for online shopping, but it’s more window shopping, to see what [is] the cheapest price I can get it. ”

New York respondent

For other Internet users in the Los Angeles focus groups, the credibility of a company Web site greatly influenced purchasing habits.

“ The only sites that I buy stuff from are the ones that I get catalogs from at home. They’re really the only ones I trust, ... I guess because ... I know it’s a real company. ”

Los Angeles respondent

Los Angeles focus group participants expressed a desire to support Latino-owned businesses and those that make charitable donations to benefit the Latino community:

“ There’s some [Latino] Web sites. But if you’re going to buy a book, they’re linked up to Amazon, so they really are not a Latino Web site or a bookstore you could buy from. They’re just linked on to Amazon.com or Barnes & Noble. ”

Los Angeles respondent

Finally, Latino Internet users in both Los Angeles and New York focus groups cited leisure activity as a reason to access the Internet. In New York, respondents called the Internet “fun” and useful for leisure activities. Such activities included playing games, getting news about their alma maters or finding old friends. Both Los Angeles and New York participants also mentioned locating addresses, finding information about products or ideas they were curious about, searching for entertainment news and finding popular music. One New York respondent admitted to accessing Walter Mercado, a Web-based Spanish-language astrologer, on a regular basis. Two Los Angeles respondents said they used Internet dating services.

Respondents cited popular culture and entertainment materials less commonly than more serious material. One New York respondent said that he tries “to use every resource on the Internet as possible.”



Like Internet users, the New York and Los Angeles respondents who don't use the Internet nevertheless had a high level of awareness of the practical benefits of Internet use, such as the ease of obtaining information and saving time.

"I could find weather conditions, hotels and stuff like that, because I travel sometimes in my business. ... It would be good to know where I'm going or what it's going to be like."

Los Angeles respondent

"E-mail would be very helpful. ... Saving time by not having to go places to access information. ... You could solve issues you need to solve without having to move from home."

New York respondent

Among Internet non-users, both Los Angeles and New York respondents mirrored the Internet users when asked how they would use the Internet if they could access it: i.e., for information and research purposes.

"To look for information like concert tickets and sports, things like that."

Los Angeles respondent

"I would like to expand my knowledge, to educate myself... It would be for self knowledge. I could interact in today's technological world... And I would like to be able to interact with other people and be educated."

New York respondent

One Los Angeles non-user indicated an interest in online banking. Some New York non-users expressed an interest in e-commerce. But as with users, there were some who would not want to use the Internet for shopping. Other Los Angeles and New York non-users said they would use the Internet to access news.

Both Los Angeles and New York respondents said they would also use the Internet to stay in touch via e-mail with far-away relatives and friends, especially family members in Latin America.

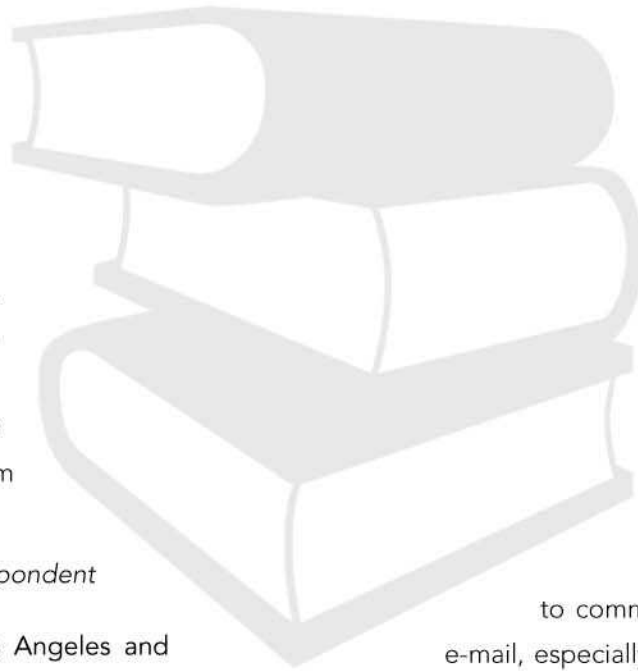
"I do like to communicate through e-mail, especially because I have family overseas."

Los Angeles respondent

"To maintain contact with my loved ones and with my friends. ... Also to buy books [that are hard to find here from Spain and Latin America]. ... We need this kind of information to keep in touch with our roots and to have our own identity."

New York respondent

Two Los Angeles non-users said that e-mail would offer them the ability to maintain close family ties, as well as to save money.





“ If I had e-mail, I wouldn’t have to spend so much on calls. I would have been able to receive a photo of the baby through e-mail without having to wait a month to receive it. So for me, it makes me feel closer to my family, which is something I want. ”

Los Angeles respondent

Some non-Internet users in New York said they would use the Internet to interact better with their children and to keep up with what they’re doing. This was related both to fears about the potential dangers for children and desires to share common interests with them. One New York respondent related a story about her daughter getting involved with a man on the Internet, resulting in a conflict with the respondent. “You have to get in and learn [to use the Internet] ... because you have children, and you need to be able to see what is going on,” the respondent said.

Other New York non-users offered more positive motivations for wanting to connect with their children about the Internet.

“ Yes, I would like to learn, because my kids talk about computers all the time ... and then I feel left out. I like to be with them, knowing everything they’re doing, even if it’s computer[s], whatever. ”

New York respondent

Interestingly, Internet users in New York focus groups did not mention using the Internet as a way to maintain ties with their children. One possible reason: significantly fewer of them had children. Alternatively, but less plausibly, Internet users with children may take such interaction for granted so much that they didn’t bother to mention it. A few non-Internet users viewed the Internet as a waste of time and effort. We will examine this attitude in more detail in the following section.

What is Stopping Non-Users From Going Online?

Obstacles to Accessing the Internet

Internet non-user focus groups in both Los Angeles and New York expressed many reasons why they do not access the Internet. The major obstacles:

- Fear that the Internet will harm themselves or their family or children.
- Ambivalence toward the technology (characterized by fascination as well as intimidation because of ignorance or weak language skills).
- Lack of access to a computer.
- Inability to afford the hardware and connection charges.
- Lack of computer and Internet knowledge and skills.
- Language barriers.

Some non-Internet users in New York and Los Angeles focus groups expressed an ambivalent attitude toward the Internet. Though they admitted a lack of understanding about how to use the Internet, they also understood the Internet’s general importance in society and knew that there are benefits to being online. But they generally expressed two types of fears: concern that they or their children could be harmed via the Internet and concern about a lack of security and the potential for the misuse of personal information.

Non-users in New York, for example, cited fears at least as strong as their perceptions that the Internet is useful. Respondents variously described the Internet as “very dangerous” and “harmful,” offering “bad things” and the potential for “alienation.”



Other New York participants expressed a lack of motivation to use the technology or frustration when trying to connect.

Among New York non-users, the Spanish-speaking group expressed more fears and negative attitudes while the English-speaking focus group expressed more positive feelings.

“ This is the miracle of the new millennium. ”

English-speaking New York respondent

“ My daughter explores the world and learns a lot through it, and she has gained because she has ‘traveled’ and has acquired knowledge. ”

English-speaking New York respondent

In terms of specific fears, both New York and Los Angeles respondents expressed concern about the Internet’s potential to harm their children or families.

“ One of the worst things that this phenomenon can bring is the breakdown of the family. ”

New York respondent

“ There is no security ... for children [who use] the Internet. ... They type one word, ‘Barbie,’ and something sexy comes out. I think they should have...more blocking. ”

Los Angeles respondent

“ They’ll sit in front of the computer for hours at a time, without eating, going to the bathroom or getting dressed. ”

Los Angeles respondent

New York respondents said the Internet “can also be dangerous ... if it’s not supervised ... when you have children.” They expressed fear of potential Internet pedophiles that want to have “sex with children 8 years old, 10 years old; prostitution and things like that.” One participant said, “Using [the] Internet can do great harm,” when referring to his brother’s habit of looking for information in a superficial way, “rather than going to the library and searching through books.”

Another New York participant argued, “if in the house there are five people, there will be five com-

puters, and each one will live in their cubicle, and then who knows when they will speak.” This concern also came up in discussions by one New York group of Internet users. Participants similarly



expressed the worry that the Internet could sever close family ties. Even so, those respondents also expressed the conviction that e-mail “brought closer” loved ones who were far away. Some comments by New York non-users reflected common myths about Internet dependency and abuse: “being addicted to the Internet,” “being sucked up,” “being stuck to the computer”; becoming dependent on the technology; and “people meeting weirdos through the Internet.”

Among New York and Los Angeles Internet non-users, the fear of family harm concerned the potential loss of important Latino values: warmth and sociability.



“ This is one of my greatest concerns about what will happen ... because I believe that the Latino culture so far remains very affectionate, and I think that if the Internet becomes part of one’s life day after day, this will disappear and will not be there any more. And I would like this to exist always among us. ”

New York respondent

“ The feelings, the “cariños” are lost; love, the sensations, are lost with all these. ”

New York respondent

Cyber cafes: “ People socializing around computer[s], that seems very superficial to me. ”

Spanish-speaking New York respondent

E-mail: “ I prefer really to go have a cup of coffee with the person. ”

Spanish-speaking New York respondent

Beyond fears for the family and children, New York and Los Angeles Internet non-users expressed concerns about the Internet’s potential for personal harm. Many Los Angeles and New York participants cited fears of credit card fraud, computer viruses, lack of privacy, false information, consumer disadvantages, untrustworthy Internet providers, and computers in general.

Internet non-users in Los Angeles and New York focus groups also expressed frustration trying to connect. Some expressed strongly negative attitudes toward technology, others, intimidation, frustration or indifference.

“ For me, it is a waste of time. ... I prefer to read a book than to sit in front of a screen where my eyes will be wasted. ”

New York respondent

“ I’m very anti-technology. I don’t believe in the Internet. I don’t use it. I don’t like it. I don’t care for it. I’d rather study using research books, libraries ... the old way. ”

Los Angeles respondent

“ I love [the idea of] the Internet; I am fascinated by it, but there is fear: fear of entering. ... I have tried it a couple of times, and these boxes came out, and an error. ... So I better just not go in, because I do not want to break [the] computer. ”

New York respondent

But for most respondents, frustration was related to the inability to feel comfortable with the technology more than to a principled position about technology. In both Los Angeles Internet non-user groups, several participants either tried unsuccessfully to use the Internet or were familiar with it by observing others. Many expressed a desire and willingness to learn how to use the Internet and added that they had been frustrated when trying to do so. In New York, several Internet non-users also either tried unsuccessfully to use the Internet or had observed other members of their family using it. With the help of friends and family, some non-Internet users were actually indirect users.



“It’s very difficult to find the information you are looking for. You have to go through a lot of tiers to find the information. Sometimes I could be logged-on for a few hours and still not find the information I need.”

Los Angeles respondent

“If suddenly everyone tells me they cannot help me anymore to find the information, ... if I would have to get the information all by myself and there is no other way ... then I would have no recourse but to start using [the Internet].”

New York respondent

English-speaking non-users expressed a more positive attitude about the Internet. A possible reason: such participants felt more comfortable with the technology for language reasons. In addition, four individuals in the English-speaking group had recently registered to take computer classes, suggesting they had already decided that the technology’s positives outweighed its negatives. The other participants in the English-speaking non-users group were all students. The English-speaking group seemed much more inclined to become Internet users. They expressed positive ideas about the Internet, with phrases such as “education,” “the knowledge that you gain from it” and “the Internet is information.”

“You can find anything through the Internet. And it could help us a lot. And I think that we’re going to be depending a lot on the Internet. This is going to be the future. ...This is going to be for the children: our children, our grandchildren.”

New York respondent

Among the Spanish-speaking New York non-users, none spoke Spanish exclusively, and all had some command of English. Most seemed complacent about their non-user status, although they got excited when asked to imagine that they had overcome all obstacles and could navigate through the Internet. But, only one participant expressed a desire to learn how to use the Internet, and even she admitted frustrations when trying to do so.

“I am starting to perceive that ... with the Internet ... they are trying to inject us with a sense of need, a social need or a personal need, and I consciously refuse this. ... Some years ago I did not need it; why suddenly [do] they want to inject this idea that not knowing about [the] Internet is as if you did not know how to read or write? ... Maybe I would start using the Internet as entertainment, but without this commercial notion that it is a need. ... This takes away my freedom as a human being.”

New York respondent

It is hard to evaluate the extent to which this negative attitude was genuine. The non-users’ negative attitudes toward Internet use may stem from their feelings of inadequacy concerning their lack of skills in an area that is increasingly recognized as important in society. In the course of focus group conversations, the tone shifted from negative to positive as participants contemplated the removal of all obstacles to Internet use. The shift suggested that participants were receptive to the Internet, and that most would welcome the opportunity to overcome the obstacles to getting online. In one New York group, non-users who expressed an initial hostility went on to speak eloquently and positively about the potential uses of online resources.



Indeed, both of the New York Internet non-user focus groups felt that the Internet was becoming ubiquitous. Participants in one group nodded at the following comments: "It's going to become part of your life, like TV"; "a necessity. It's going to be a necessity"; and "I think [the] Internet is going to be something...really required."

Beyond fears and attitudes, many of the obstacles to Internet access appear to go beyond respondents' reasonable personal control. Specifically, respondents in both New York and Los Angeles cited the lack of a computer or the inability to afford one.

"If I had a computer, I would definitely get into it."

Los Angeles respondent

"A computer costs too much money."

New York respondent

"We don't have a computer at home. You know, it's too expensive. ... That's one of the main reasons."

New York respondent

Respondents also cited the inability to afford the connection charges as an obstacle to Internet access.

"If it was free, I'd use it."

Los Angeles respondent

"That's probably the reason I haven't joined the Internet. It costs \$20 a month."

New York respondent

Respondents also cited a lack of computer knowledge or Internet technical skills as an obstacle. The frequency of such responses suggests it is an important obstacle.

"I have a computer at home, but I've received the Internet disks in the mail and I don't know how to load them onto my computer. I don't know how to [get help], and I feel that it would take me a long time to program it into my computer."

Los Angeles respondent

"Someone would have to explain this mess to me, how to understand it, how to use it. ... Then I would use it."

New York respondent

One New York Internet non-user said, "It is a world that I do not know, but would like to learn about definitely, and right now I think I will learn. ... I just do not know how to start, ... how to enter."

Finally, Internet non-users in both Los Angeles and New York cited language barriers that prevented some from getting online.

"If you had the ability to choose your language prior to logging on, because I use Spanish a lot ... [and] if the program on the computer had a way that I could choose quickly in Spanish, I think that would be helpful."

Los Angeles respondent





“ The problem of not speaking English, I think it would be hard to enter, no? Then I do not have much knowledge of how it works; I would not know how to look for things. ”

New York respondent

Internet Content

Language and Latino Web Sites

Is there a dearth of Latino-oriented Internet content, and is that an obstacle to increased Latino Internet access? Though Internet non-users expressed culturally specific fears about the Internet and cited language barriers as an obstacle to Internet access, they did not single out a perceived lack of Latino Internet content as a major obstacle.

Still, it is worth looking at Latino Internet content as a factor in increasing and enhancing Latino Internet use. It's a complex issue, particularly when considering the language in which individuals prefer to access Internet information. Focus group results speak to the importance of culturally sensitive content for Latino Internet users and non-users alike.

Respondent Profiles

For purposes of this discussion, it is worth noting that the focus group respondents clustered in three specific profiles reflecting their preferences for language and Latino content.

First is the young student or professional who considers himself or herself an American with Latino roots and often lives with parents or grandparents who speak Spanish. Based on the focus group responses, it's likely such an individual would prefer English as the default language, with the option of

using Spanish, as one participant said, when they are "in the mood" or "to practice." Such a person would also be interested in Latino topics first, and maybe Latin American issues second (the degree of interest varied from strong to nil). We can call this group the "young professional": While proud of their Latino heritage, they have been acculturated into U.S. society.

“ When I sit at my computer, I don't think of Spanish; for some reason, it's all English. And that's my environment anyway. And when I'm doing a search, whatever comes up is all in English. If there's a Spanish site, I'd go into it, but my results are usually in English. ”

New York respondent

Next, we have the more mature (young to mid-life) graduate student or professional who grew up outside of the United States, speaks English well and lives permanently in this country. Such respondents tend to view themselves first as citizens of their mother country. But they have allegiances to the United States, as they may have children growing up as citizens of this country. Individuals with these characteristics would most likely say that their language preference for the Internet would depend on the context. For leisure and Latin American news, they would prefer Spanish; for research and technical information, they would prefer English. Moreover, they would be interested in Latin American issues, especially news, more than in Latino issues in the United States, unless this was important for their work. We call these respondents the "mature professional."

“ It depends on the subject. I basically read Spanish [language] news, because that's the way to go. I mean, if I want to read news from Colombia, Argentina, Spain, I read in Spanish. ... Now, I read in English most of the Web sites. ”



... For example, I won't ever read anything in Spanish regarding computers. Because to me, that's like second-hand information. I read it in English, which is the language of computers. ... So it depends on the subject ¹¹

New York respondent

Third are Internet non-users who are non-professional working mothers. They have trouble with English and have children who are growing up in this country. Often, they also care for older relatives who speak only Spanish. A person with this profile would see the importance of having access to both languages, especially for their children, but would prefer to have information for themselves or their older relatives in Spanish. Because they could not articulate what types of sites they would access, it is hard to predict what type of Latino sites they would prefer. Given their divided attention between two generations at home, however, it's probable that they would want access to sites with both languages in order to cater to their own interests, as well as to those of their children and older relatives. We call this profile the "unskilled."

¹¹ For me, in Spanish, because my English is not good enough many times. Although I do see the benefits of gaining a technical vocabulary in English. ¹¹

New York respondent

"Mature professionals" tend to live in independent households, while the "unskilled" tend to share households with both younger and older generations of relatives.

"Language as a Way of Thinking": Bilingualism

Participants in all Los Angeles and New York focus groups were asked to indicate which language they actually accessed or would prefer to access the Internet, and why. Participants in the non-user groups were asked this question in the context of projecting themselves into a future time when they might access the Internet. In both Los Angeles and New York, the conversations that emerged in all groups highlighted two critical factors related to Latino use of the Internet: the importance of bilingualism and the desire to protect the integrity of the Spanish language.

We must consider bilingualism in any discussion of Internet use in the Latino community, in terms of both enhanced participation and of broader access.

In response to the question in which language they usually browsed the Internet, participants' answers ranged from "only English" to "it depends" to "both." Because the Internet user focus groups had a larger representation of English-dominant speakers in Los Angeles, or "young professional" and "mature professional" in New York, there were interesting differences in language preferences between users and non-users within those profiles.

Among Los Angeles respondents, 19 out of 21 individuals in the Internet user groups preferred English first, though many welcomed the option of Spanish. The remaining two users responded "both." Participants in the non-user groups said they would prefer to access the Internet in both languages. In the non-user groups, two expressed a preference for Spanish; nine expressed a preference for English; and four for both.





Among New York respondents, 19 out of 27 individuals in the Internet user groups preferred English first, though many welcomed the option of Spanish. By contrast, all 15 of the respondents in the Internet non-user groups said that they preferred to access the Internet in both languages, even though there were slight variations, with similar preferences for Spanish or English. (Four expressed a preference for Spanish; five expressed a preference for English.) Interestingly, there were no substantial differences in language preference between the Spanish- and the English-speaking non-users.

Among Los Angeles respondents, the reasons for English preference included feeling more comfortable because English is their dominant language.

“ I mostly go to sites in English, mostly because it's much more comfortable for me. I mean, I am bilingual, but not perfectly fluent, not like my parents. ... It's much easier for me that way. ”

Los Angeles respondent

Among New York respondents, participants identified as "young professionals" preferred English, though their responses varied in intensity.

“ English, not because of the lack of [Spanish] sites, but just because of my lack of dominance of Spanish. ”

New York respondent

Despite their preference for English, all the "young professionals" stressed their Latino background, and most had at least some familiarity and an affective response toward Spanish.

“ In general, I feel more comfortable in English, but more loyal to Spanish. So I'll read things in Spanish. ”

New York respondent

Los Angeles and New York respondents both offered other reasons for preferring English online: the information is required in English, most of the information online is in English or being in the United States requires knowledge of English. Respondents gave other reasons as well: being able to practice and improve English skills; gaining a technical vocabulary; ensuring that information is correct and accurate; or to avoid incorrect usage of Spanish (many participants were relatively unfamiliar with the terminology of the Internet in Spanish).

“ I'm a native Spanish speaker. I speak Spanish fluently. But if I had a preference, I would choose English, only because there's a lot more of a selection in English. But then again, when I am looking for something that is related to Latin America, for example, I go to sites that are in Spanish. ”

Los Angeles respondent

“ All scientific materials are in English; basically, scientists in the world speak English. ”

New York respondent

New York individuals who expressed a preference for Spanish-language Internet access were either "mature professionals" or "unskilled." Even some "young professionals", who preferred English, expressed reasons to have the Spanish option: feeling more comfortable because Spanish is the dominant language or command of English is weak, to ensure access to non-English speakers, to keep in



touch with Latino roots, to practice or learn Spanish, or for cultural reasons. Los Angeles respondents expressed similar sentiments.

“What we need is Spanish, so that those persons who do not know English can still learn or find what they are looking for.”

New York respondent

“I think that I would prefer Spanish at this time, because I think it would help me a lot. The primary language spoken in our home is Spanish. Even at work, I speak more Spanish than English.”

Los Angeles respondent

“[If it is a Latino Web site,] then it is a matter of preserving the language, which in turn has to do with saving the culture. For me, the matter of identity is very important. ... Being Latino is not only about eating rice and beans or tortillas; it has to do with listening to merengue, cumbia, salsa ... and the richness of the language.”

New York respondent

Some "young professionals" argued the opposite when discussing Latino Web sites.

“Yupi.com is in Spanish, which to me does not apply. I mean, I speak Spanish, but I don't want to go read Spanish. ... It's too much work.”

New York respondent

Most respondents qualified their language preference by saying that it depended on context. In New York, at least 10 participants from the various groups said language choice depended on context. Most "young professionals" who preferred English said they would also welcome Spanish options.

“It really depends. I know I'm English dominant, although I'm fluent in Spanish. I know I feel much more comfortable, because I

have a much better command of English. But it depends. If I'm doing research ... there just might be more sources in Spanish, so I'll read it in Spanish.”

New York respondent

“I think I would choose English and Spanish. I love that Spanish is available if I have to go on, for example, Quepasa.com. I have an e-mail address, I pick Spanish. It's a way to practice my Spanish. I'd like to know that I always will remember it. And I always pick up a few vocabulary words ... so that if I need to speak Spanish, I can.”

Los Angeles respondent





Los Angeles and New York Internet non-users expressed a preference to use both languages when using the Internet. The reasons: to promote individual bilingualism; to promote family and to promote community heterogeneity with respect to bilingualism.

Among New York non-users, the preference for using both languages spanned both the Spanish-speaking and the English-speaking groups. One possible reason for this consensus could be that the group was affected by the opinions of the majority of individuals, who happened to belong to the "unskilled" group. That group was characterized in part as being a bridge between the younger generations who speak English and the older generations who speak Spanish.

In both New York and Los Angeles groups, respondents expressed a desire to take advantage of their bilingualism. In some cases, participants suggested that using both languages would allow the person to practice the weaker language, in other cases the motivation was to get the best of both worlds.

“ I’d like to see bilingual sites. ... When I’m looking for stuff, I’m looking for things in English. Which doesn’t mean that things of Spanish content aren’t of interest to me. But I think making it bilingual would make it a little bit more friendly to me. ”

New York respondent

In all cases, there is a sense that the Internet is a learning tool and that language is a means to maximizing the goal of accessing resources and information.

Respondents in both New York and Los Angeles also offered family and community motivations for preferring Internet access in both Spanish and English based on "family bilingualism." Members of the same family may have a different dominant language, yet may want to share the same resources, including access to Internet information. There is a generational component to these motivations as well.

Access to information in both languages often allows family members to share an important resource. The Internet may bring the family closer as English-speaking children access Spanish information for their parents. Providing opportunities for access to information in both languages can help strengthen family ties, given the pervasive differences in language dominance by members of different generations within the same family. This

finding is particularly relevant since past TRPI research suggests that Latino families are concerned about the possibility that use of computers and the Internet may lead to antisocial behavior.⁴ Perceptions about how the Internet can affect the closeness of the family may also affect the likelihood that Latinos will get online. Providing access to information in both languages and to bilingual Web sites—and finding ways to educate Latinos about these options—may address a fear that the Internet might harm children, dehumanize Latino households, divide family members or destroy family values.

⁴ The Tomás Rivera Policy Institute. "Buying Into the Computer Age: A Look at the Hispanic Middle Class." 1997.



“ I would want my mom to use the Internet too. And if it were in Spanish, she would be able to understand everything. ... That way she could do it herself, and she could understand it herself ... e-mail everyone without having to have someone help her out. And she could do it on her own. My family, it would bring a lot of us together if it were in Spanish. ”

Los Angeles respondent

“ I think it is important to have the information in Spanish and English, because that way, if a young person is reading in English and the mom wants to be informed, the kid can say, ‘Mom, you can read this in Spanish.’ ”

New York respondent

“ I know a lot of the parents of the students I work with don’t know English. So if I’m able to communicate that language or print it out in Spanish, and then hand it to them, I’m extremely happy that I can have it in that format. ”

Los Angeles respondent

The desirability of Spanish-English language options was made clear in the context of describing the characteristics of good and bad Web sites. Latino Internet users like having the two options both for personal and professional reasons.

Websites that are "user-friendly", attractive and make information easy to find were highly recommended. However, while pictures and other graphics were described as visually attractive, they had their drawbacks, too, as they slowed down the

speed with which a website could be loaded onto users' computer screens:

“ I want quick downloading. If it takes me more than three minutes to download, I just get up and go get something to do and then come back. But if it's still downloading, I log off and try something else. ”

Los Angeles respondent

“ I would like to have a choice of graphics, because sometimes I don't have time for the graphics to download. I know they are going to be beautiful and pretty, and so I would like to have that choice: do you want graphics or not. ”

Los Angeles respondent

Slowness and otherwise time-consuming features were cited by Latino Internet users in other contexts too, as one of the characteristics of less preferable websites. While some participants indicated they had older computers, even some with newer, faster computers were critical of downloading speeds via modem. This discussion also serves as an indication of a strong need for high-speed Internet service, or broadband, among these focus group participants.

Preserving the Integrity of the Spanish Language on the Internet

Respondents in both New York and Los Angeles stressed the importance of good Internet translations as a way to preserve the integrity of the Spanish language. All participants who mentioned this issue had very strong feelings about the need to enforce the use of good Spanish, and they linked this need to the desire to protect the Hispanic heritage. This issue is also connected to one of cultural sensitivity.



One Los Angeles respondent said that Web authors should strive not for literal translations, but rather for translations that are aimed at the Spanish-speaking community. Internet users felt someone who is bilingual and bicultural should do the translations.

“ The bottom line is that it doesn't translate [well when] the people who are doing the translation are not Spanish speakers. ... You can't translate the meaning; you can't translate the emotion. ... You have to have people who were born in this culture to be able to translate it, and you have to [hire] Spanish-speaking people [whose] native tongue is Spanish. You can't have a Spanish institute, [which] claims to be the foremost leader on translating. ”

Los Angeles respondent

“ A language is not a way of saying something, but a way of thinking. ... When you see the translations, it's just a crime. ... Sometimes, you just can't get it. ”

New York respondent

A New York respondent said, "There is an English bias ... that I think is a pity, because we are missing a lot." But another New Yorker dissented, arguing that even though the technology for translations was not very good in many Web sites, translated texts were still helpful for those members of the Spanish community who do not speak English.

Respondents identified another problem: the extent to which computer-related English words should appear within a Spanish text. One New York respon-

dent strongly criticized what she called the "Spanglization" of such terms, as in the use of the verb "escanear" to refer to the process of scanning. The suggestion by other respondents was to leave words in English when there was no technical word in Spanish, but to put it in quotes. Another said that he had found a list of translations for computer vocabulary in a Web site from Spain.

“ One concern ... is the translation of words that have been created by technology, like 'link.' Many sites in Spanish translate 'link,' but what is 'link' [in Spanish]? That's one problem that [our] organization, [encountered] when we were translating our Web site. 'Browser' and all of these words. ... From linko all the way to liga. So you think there would be a standard. ”

Los Angeles respondent

Comments about Spanish distortions represented a criticism that applied to the Latino community itself. Some discussions focused on the responsibility Latinos have to maintain the integrity of the language. Two individuals argued the need to use standard Spanish on the Internet, rather than "Spanglish" or regionalisms, to avoid confusion.

“ The way I was raised ...you say it all in Spanish, or you say it all in English. And so when I see Web sites that combine Spanish and English, I just automatically won't go to it anymore. ”

Los Angeles respondent





Not everyone agreed:

“ There are [different] words and dialects in the Spanish language [from countries such as] Peru, Argentina, Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala. ... I feel that it is safe to ... choose either one that is correct, and NEVER use Spanglish, because it deteriorates the language. Spanglish should not be at all accepted. ”

Los Angeles respondent

“ But you just invalidated a whole group of people by saying that. ”

Los Angeles respondent

The diversity of the Latino community as a main consideration when providing Internet material also surfaced as a major concern among the users and non-users group.

“ We have different degrees in education and interests ... and don't treat us like we are all the same ... I think that is a big mistake. ”

Los Angeles respondent

One Los Angeles participant felt there were no good quality Spanish-language Web sites. Another disagreed.

“ There's tons, there's millions of Spanish-speaking Latinos [who] don't even go [to Spanish language Web sites] because they don't have access, and if they do have access, they don't go there because the sites are horrible. I haven't really come across any good ones, and I would like to find good ones. ”

Los Angeles respondent

“ Loquesea.com, quepasa.com, they're great. ... I have found good stuff on ... Yupi, terra, masalto. ”

Los Angeles respondent

One participant had no knowledge that Spanish language Web sites existed.

“ Okay, my first language is Spanish; however, I didn't know that there were sites in Spanish. I had no idea [of] it. [I never] even [thought] of looking. I don't know why. I have been [in the United States] for a very long time. I mean, everything that I do my whole life is in English. ”

Los Angeles respondent

But overall, Los Angeles participants felt that there is some excellent Latino and Spanish-language content online and that perhaps the problem lies in the absence of information about its existence or about how to access that information.

Web Sites and Culturally Sensitive Latino Content

Participants in the Los Angeles and New York Internet user groups were asked how often they accessed Web sites that focus specifically on Latino issues or that have Latin American or Spanish-language content. Non-users were asked whether they would access Latino, Latin American or Spanish-language Web sites if they overcame their obstacles to getting online.

In New York, the discussion that ensued focused on the importance of culturally sensitive content—content that would reflect an accurate and respectful understanding of Latino issues and of the Latino population—and its relationship to the use of the Internet by Latinos.



There was no clear consensus among participants about several issues, including the meaning of the term "Latino issues." Participants mixed their comments about Latino issues in the United States with Latin American issues, making it hard to provide any analysis about the implications of this distinction as it relates to Latino Internet content. There were also conflicting opinions about the quality of Latino content on the Internet and about what later became labeled "Latino Web sites." This lack of common ground resulted in a more diffuse and less consensual conversation compared to other parts of the interviews, with participants offering divergent opinions and dialogue. Some points represent the opinion of a single individual, not so much because they are representative of agreements among a subgroup, but because they may highlight an interesting idea worth pursuing in the future.

Nevertheless, we can draw three conclusions from the discussion about Latino Web sites and cultural sensitivity. First, in general, participants from the New York focus groups welcomed the idea of being able to find culturally sensitive, Latino-oriented sites on the Internet. Second, many respondents from all focus groups and profile types wanted such Web sites to be respectful of Latino culture and expressed frustration with existing Internet practices that distort it. Third, despite the first two assertions, nothing participants said during the conversation suggests that lack of culturally sensitive content in and of itself would be the critical obstacle to accessing and using the Internet.

When participants from the Internet user groups were asked about the frequency of access to Latino related sites and about their opinions of the quality of Latino content on the Internet, the reviews were mixed. In terms of frequency, the responses varied by profile. The "young professionals" tended to access Spanish and Latin American Web sites very rarely, and U.S.-based Latino sites more frequently, although there was great variability with respect to how frequently.

" Spanish never, Latin America, 'tampoco' ... even though I should. I always say I'm going to, and I never do. Latino, I do a lot, because of work. "

New York respondent

" On Latino issues every now and then; Latin American, never; Spanish never. "

New York respondent

By contrast, the "mature professionals" said they would access Latin American sites very frequently, but U.S.-based Latino sites only when work would demand it or if a reference popped out in another context.

" On Latino issues in the U.S., only if I'm looking for something specific that I'm working on. "

New York respondent

When Los Angeles participants from the Internet user groups were asked about their frequency of access to Latino related sites, responses similarly varied. Some said they accessed Spanish-language and Latin American Web sites very rarely and U.S.-based Latino sites more frequently, although there was great variability with respect to how frequently.

" I really don't care about anybody else outside Los Angeles and Orange County. So LatinoLA.com serves my purposes just fine. Every once in a while, I'll wander, and I'll find information about Spain or about Mexico, especially if it's about Chihuahua. ... That's where I'm from. But I don't stay too interested. I stay interested in what's going on in my life right now, and what events I can attend. "

Los Angeles respondent



The Los Angeles Internet non-users spoke extensively about the types of Web sites they thought they would find interesting once they overcame the obstacles to getting online. But New York non-users had a hard time envisioning the notion of Latino-specific content at first, probably because of lack of familiarity. Still, once some New York non-user participants started to provide examples, most others expressed a positive attitude toward the prospect of accessing Latino-content Web sites.

“ I would like to visit Web sites that could give me a better idea of how Latinos are dealing with immigration issues, because immigration issues ... are very important for us. ”

Los Angeles respondent

“ I would like to look up Spanish so I could learn more of the language. And also about Latinos. ... See what's happening around Los Angeles and [find out about] issues ... like the disadvantages that we have. ”

Los Angeles respondent

“ Points of different issues and products that mostly interest Latinos here. ... A Web site that can give you that kind of information of ... how to start [a] business as a Latino. ”

Los Angeles respondent

“ I'm stuck [laughter]. No, I find it interesting to know about my cultural background. ... But it all depends what you know. ... When you ... learn to do something, then you keep doing it. But I don't know how to do it, so I can't say I'm interested in this. ... I just have to be in it. Like, try it first, and then I can explore it. ”

New York respondent

As for the quality of such Web sites, New York respondents did not follow any pattern. Positive and negative comments came from both "young professionals" and "mature professionals." One "young professional" said the sites in this country did not appeal to her because they did not apply to daily issues in her life. She said that Spanish sites are much better than Hispanic sites in the United States. But another said that sites from other countries did not appeal to him and suggested that what he found "wasn't enough to make me keep coming back." He felt that Latino Web sites in the United States were more interactive and provided good information not available in the traditional mass media. Yet, another "young professional" characterized as "really useful" an English-language Web site about Latin America.

"Mature professionals" and "young professionals" in the New York Internet user focus groups engaged in lively conversations about a variety of Internet resources with Latino content that they use, U.S.-based and otherwise. A woman mentioned a helpful site that provides a listing of cultural events for Latino parents and their children. A man mentioned a site with short stories for babies from a variety of Latin American countries. Another man described an excellent Web site about a Latino organization offering workshops. Several New York respondents said they thought that many Latino Web sites have improved significantly in the past few years. They noted that there is a greater diversity of Web sites to choose from, and they praised sites' designs and technical layout.

“ In the U.S., web sites are improving dramatically. I think it's about time that they're catching up with the Latino population in the U.S. So I think they're doing more or less a good job. They're finally catching up and realizing that we are a large population, and that we should be served properly. ”

New York respondent



This opinion was challenged by another New Yorker, who said that there was no good material for Latino children to do research in the United States. This triggered a stream of comments about the need for Latinos to demand quality from companies and Webmasters. Others pointed to the need to challenge stereotypes about what Latinos want and to ask companies to view the Latino public in a broader light to become more culturally sensitive to their needs. Still others commented about the need to motivate Latino organizations to put their own information on the Internet so that it can be accessed by the Latino community. Participants also mentioned the lack of good portals that have connections to Latino Web sites, which would make it easier for people to search for Latino-related content or material in Spanish. And respondents pointed out the need to find ways to disseminate information about the excellent material that is already available.

Respondents from all New York groups and all profiles wanted Latino Web sites to respect Latino culture. New York respondents were proud of their Latino heritage, sensitive to their community needs and curious to learn more about that heritage, not only in the context of the United States, but also in Latin America. They expressed frustration with existing Internet practices that distort or dismiss their heritage and were adamant about the importance of ensuring that Latino Web sites to do not distort it. One participant in the Spanish speaking non-user group complained about the lack of accents on the Internet.

New York Internet users and non-users alike expressed concern about the negative effects of stereotyping and the importance of reflecting the

diversity of the Latino community in culturally sensitive material. Some New York respondents saw the Internet in general, and Latino Web sites in particular, as potential tools to help fight the stereotypes in mainstream media, as well as to help young Latinos get more in touch with their roots.

“ Either they stereotype us, like, ‘You’re someone illegal who just came off the boat,’ who doesn’t know anything; or, ‘You’re this person who actually lives in the Dominican Republic, or in Spain.’ ”

New York respondent

“ We all have different cultural backgrounds and different flags that we have alliances to. And the thing that links most of us in Latin America is the language. And when there are Web sites created to address us or to sell us something, they should not assume that we all dance to the beat of the same drummer. ”

New York respondent

“ The information has to be focused in a simple way, so that youth have access to it. ... Many young people here have a tendency to unconsciously feel less because they are Latinos, be they Puerto Rican, Dominicans, South Americans, whatever, and this is because of the lack of information. They do not know their history ... their geography, and obviously the view they have here is the one presented on the news. ”

New York respondent



One issue of concern was the need to make others realize that the Latino culture goes beyond popular music, and to figure out ways to change suppliers' misperceptions of Latino demands for liquor and entertainment gossip.

“ There must be diversity [in the Internet supply of resources for Latinos], because it seems as if there are different interests to be considered. For example, I am more interested in learning about Latin America because I can access information about what goes on here through the TV. ”

New York respondent

Though there is a perceived lack of culturally sensitive Internet material, this does not necessarily mean such concerns are reducing Latino participation or access to the Internet in the present. Participants also made it clear that there is excellent Latino and Spanish-language content, and that perhaps the access problem lies in the absence of information about its existence.

“ I only use Web sites in English. ... But now that I've heard a lot of other Hispanic sites on Latin American issues, I would like to look at them. ”

New York respondent

Nothing the New York participants said suggests that lack of culturally sensitive content in and of itself would be the critical obstacle to greater Latino access to the Internet.

Erasing the Digital Divide: Increasing and Enhancing Latino Internet Use

Ideas from Participants

During each of the Los Angeles and New York focus group interviews, researchers invited participants to suggest ideas to make the Internet more attractive to Latinos.

Their responses fall in two areas: recommendations to attract Latino non-Internet users online and recommendations to pique the interest of Latinos who already use the Internet.

In the first area, all of the Los Angeles and New York focus groups offered strikingly similar recommendations: provide or help provide computers; offer free Internet access; and educate Latinos about the Internet and its relevance to them. The similarity of the responses suggests that Latinos are in wide agreement about what are the real obstacles to Internet access.

“ Provide a low cost or no cost computer at home. ”

Los Angeles respondent

“ And then there must be economic resources to pay for the service and to be able to buy the computer. ”

New York respondent

“ Free Internet service access. ”

Los Angeles respondent



“ Offer three months free. ”

New York respondent

Some participants pointed out that Internet access is already available free of charge through such companies as Netzero.com and Juno.com as well as through public access centers such as community technology centers and public libraries.

The focus group respondents offered several suggestions for educating Latinos about the Internet. The idea of educating non-users and making the Internet more relevant to them was pervasive throughout the discussions.

“ Offer something for free, at the library, or where they give English classes. ”

Los Angeles respondent

“ The real key is to educate the parents. Let them know that it is affordable. ... I think a lot of times they hear [only] this bad stuff. ‘Oh, there’s these porn sites; all the weirdos are going to come after your daughters.’ ”

Los Angeles respondent

“ Let them see the Internet as a way for them to communicate with people in their families in their original country. ”

New York respondent

“ Tell the Latino community why they need the Internet ... and also ... [need to attract different types of Latinos] as much [as] those interested in cultural and educational issues, as those who are merely interested in soap operas or gossip. ... And also, it should be attractive for children [because parents are interested in having their children progress in ways they did not]. ”

New York respondent

It’s worth noting that Internet non-users in the New York focus groups stressed the lack of Internet marketing efforts aimed at Latinos—something that the Internet users failed to mention. Some Los Angeles respondents urged more Latino-friendly marketing as well.

“ I would be more interested if there was a great national-level campaign in Spanish. They would call Hispanics, Latinos to get in there, like the big marketing campaigns we see for many other things ... [offer incentives ... give explanations, point by point, like an instruction book, telling you how to enter step by step]. ... This would give you an incentive, an interest to sit down, see what is going on, you know? Then one would not be afraid of making mistakes. ”

New York respondent





“ I think it would be [good] to create more images of people, families, on TV and billboards and stuff, that people can identify with. Latinos can identify with working-class parents on a billboard ... with a computer. Just creating images that they can identify with, where they have computers central to that image...to plant the idea in their mind that, 'Okay, well, our family looks like that family, and that family has a computer, so it's not such a big thing.' ”

Los Angeles respondent

Some respondents urged Web providers to offer English-Spanish language options. Such recommendations fit with the findings above concerning the respondents' preferences for bilingualism on the Internet.

“ I think an ISP should give you the option if you want to sign on and read the content in English or Spanish. ”

Los Angeles respondent

Several Los Angeles and New York respondents said they started browsing some of the Latino sites because their curiosity was piqued through advertisements on TV, billboards or other Internet sites. This reinforces the importance of advertising Latino-interest Internet services.

“ The first time I ever saw the commercial [for Terra]; the next day, I went on. I liked it. ”

Los Angeles respondent

In New York, two Internet non-users argued that Latino Internet content is important in attracting non-Internet users online. One suggested offering language courses on the Internet at users' individual paces.

“ I would like to see a program, like Yahoo, created for the Latino community where there would be information from all parts of Latin America and also a special program for the Latino community where I could enter, and the first thing that appears on my screen is Spanish, and that I could acquire any information I wanted from Puerto Rico, from any other country. ”

New York respondent

On the second question of how to pique the interest of Latino Internet users, the responses clustered in three categories: Provide language options; advertise sites that would interest Latinos; and address Latino-specific needs and interests.

“ Well honestly, I'd like to see bilingual sites. ”

New York respondent

“ I also would like sites that would be dedicated to specific Latino issues, global issues. ”

New York respondent

Respondents also urged Internet service providers to differentiate among different groups of Latinos.



Conclusion

Latinos in the New York and Los Angeles focus groups who have access to the Internet, use it extensively for both personal and professional purposes and both are important to users. The Internet users and non-users displayed a high level of awareness about the variety of functions that the Internet is able to serve. They cited communication, access to information, and research as the most important. In terms of communication, participants particularly cited e-mail for both personal and professional exchanges, for receiving newsletters and for saving money on international telephone calls. In terms of accessing information and doing research, participants also reported using the Internet extensively for both personal and work-related purposes.

Respondents said they also accessed news and entertainment as a primary function. They discussed searching for national news and current events specific to Latinos and to Latin America. In addition, participants discussed using the Internet for entertainment, shopping, banking, price comparison and travel.

New York users favored research over entertainment and access to other popular culture. Such use was equally balanced between personal and professional purposes.

In the case where users did not own computers, but instead accessed the Internet through school or work, the predominant use tended to be work- or research-related. Furthermore, comments from some participants suggested that they might have begun to access the Internet because they had to use it for work or school. Only later did they start

accessing it for personal uses as well, eventually deciding to buy a computer for home use. This finding supports previous work by the Institute suggesting that as more computers become available to Latinos through public institutions, chances are greater that they would begin or increase regular Internet use.

With respect to the question of whether there is a perceived lack of Latino content on the Internet, the answer is two-fold. On the one hand, users said that material is available, and that its quality varies from excellent to very poor. In particular, participants praised the quality of the content produced in Latin American countries and in Spain, but found problems with features like speed and the degree of interactivity. On the other hand, while giving credit to the efforts being made by some ISPs and Web site designers in the United States, participants generally agreed that there is room for improvement with respect to the quality and scope of Latino Internet content produced in this country.

They also seemed to agree that, as this type of material expands and improves, it will have to be culturally appropriate and sensitive. Participants were very intolerant of Latino stereotyping and emphasized that the richness and internal diversity of the Latino community is also something that must be reflected online. This point was highlighted by both users and non-users in the context of discussing the meaning of culturally relevant Internet material.

An additional set of findings about non-users' attitudes toward the Internet is relevant for this discussion. Non-users who participated in the focus groups had an ambivalent attitude, characterized





simultaneously by fascination, fear and intimidation. On the one hand, all participants were well aware of the benefits of Internet use for both personal and professional purposes, even when they expressed no desire to use those benefits. On the other hand, many held negative attitudes that helped rationalize their reluctance or inability to get on the information superhighway. Fears seemed to be associated with language barriers, lack of technology skills or inappropriate material for children. Some of the fears, however, were culture-specific: Some participants associated the Internet with "coldness" and "individualism," in contrast to Latinos' preference for "warmth" and "group and family orientation."

Nevertheless, non-users attitudes shifted from negative to positive when respondents contemplated the removal of obstacles to Internet access. That shift suggests that most participants were receptive to the idea of becoming users and would likely welcome the opportunity to overcome the obstacles to getting online. It also suggests that a serious and systematic campaign to dispel misconceptions and to educate non-users about the Internet in ways that address their fears would go a long way to breaching the Digital Divide. To succeed, such a campaign must be accompanied by efforts to solve more practical obstacles: the lack of computers at home, the lack of computer and Internet skills and the cost of paying for Internet service and connection fees. Such practical obstacles represent the main factors that hinder Latino access to the Internet.

In addition, the findings show that bilingualism is a critical factor for any serious discussion of Internet use in the Latino community. Latinos also want to protect the integrity of the Spanish language which they consider an identity symbol and which unites Latino individuals who differ in many other respects. Common to all focus group participants was the desire to have the option of accessing the Internet in either English or Spanish or both, according to their current needs and motivations.

A large number of participants wanted to see Internet content offered in both languages to meet the needs of households with individuals at differing levels of English- and Spanish-language proficiency. This suggests that facilitating access to information in both languages is a way to respond to the online needs of the Latino community. This would demonstrate that computer technology in general, and Internet exposure in particular can help integrate the family, rather than fragment it, as feared by some participants.

Members of both user and non-user groups were adamant about the need to demand certain content from Internet service providers and Webmasters. From comments throughout the sessions, it became apparent that participants had a very clear vision of what this material should look like to suit their needs. It must respect and protect the integrity of the Spanish language and it must reflect and appreciate the internal diversity of the Latino community. Furthermore, it must be able to cater to both English and Spanish speakers in the community as well as to those who would like to take advantage of their bilingualism. This requires, of course, service providers and Webmasters to take the task of translation very seriously.

Participants were proud of their Latino heritage, sensitive to their community needs and both eager and curious to learn more about it in the U.S. context, as well as in the context of Latin America. Comments also indicated that the Internet represents an excellent tool to meet these needs and interests.

Finally, the focus group discussions suggested that increasing the amount of culturally sensitive Web content alone is not enough to attract more Latinos online. Although culturally specific fears and weak language skills emerged as potential barriers to accessing the Internet, respondents did not perceive the lack of Latino content as a major obstacle to greater access. As discussed before, the obstacles



are broader than simply Latino Internet content, and it is imperative that they are addressed in conjunction with any content-related efforts to make the Internet more appealing.

This does not diminish the importance of community-relevant, culturally sensitive Web sites in bridging the Digital Divide. Both users and non-users expressed a desire to see more community-relevant and culturally sensitive material. Indeed, comments across all groups and throughout all sessions indicate that more culturally sensitive and relevant material may result in enhanced Internet use by those who are already online and may provide an added incentive for potential users to find ways to overcome the other obstacles to join the virtual community.

In conclusion, if our New York and Los Angeles focus groups' preferences reflect those of the general Latino population, this study's findings suggest that once online, Latinos will certainly demand content sensitive to their language and needs. Those ISPs that are leading the efforts to respond to these preferences will certainly benefit from tapping this large and heterogeneous potential market.

“ It seems to me that we are now waking up, or at least trying to just find ourselves, to get into the competition in America. And that's very nice. We're Latinos. We stand out by saying, hey, we are here. And we have the Internet. [Laughter] ”

New York respondent

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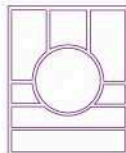
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