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# Bush Plan 'Digital Distortion'



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By [Jeffrey Benner](#) | Also by this reporter

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The Bush administration has responded to progress in bridging the digital divide by cutting technology funding for low-income communities.

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In the budget proposal released on Monday, the Bush administration seeks to eliminate some programs aimed at closing the gap between digital haves and have-nots. The biggest cut is to the [Technology Opportunities Program](#) (TOP), a federal grant program designed to bring aid to communities that are lagging in access to digital technologies. Under the Clinton administration 2001 budget, the program distributed \$42 million in grants to 74 different non-profit organizations. In 2002, that number fell to just

over \$12 million. Now Bush wants to eliminate the program altogether.

On Tuesday, the Commerce Department released a [report](#) (PDF) outlining dramatic gains in Internet use among minorities, low-income households and people living in rural areas -- groups that have been behind the national average for computer use and Internet access in years past.

The study found that Internet use is rising at 30 percent annually among Blacks, 26 percent for Hispanics, 24 percent each year for all rural households, 25 percent for households with an annual income below \$15,000, and 29 percent among single mothers with kids at home. Internet use is up 11 percent overall, with 54 percent of all Americans having regular access to the Internet.

The report does not even mention the term, "digital divide," and its tone is quite a change from the last [four editions](#) of the report, published under the Clinton administration, which were entitled, *Falling Through the Net: Toward Digital Inclusion*. The Bush version is called, *A Nation Online: How Americans are Expanding Their Use of the Internet*.

"I would call this a digital distortion," Irving said. "Do you think these numbers would be where they are without public investment?" He said during his tenure, the report was seen as a way to identify communities in need. But that seems to have changed. "It seems like their job is to report and cut, not to assist," he said.

Irving doesn't dispute that progress has been made -- the statistics don't lie -- but he chooses to emphasize different numbers. Although traditionally unwired communities are getting online in record numbers, they are still fall far behind the national average. Whites are still twice as likely as Hispanics to have Internet access, for example.

But Michael Gallagher, a commerce department official, told the *Washington Post* that the TOP program had "fulfilled its mission" and the resources were needed elsewhere.

Magda Escobar disagrees. She is the executive director of [Plugged In](#), a non-profit organization that has been working to increase Internet access in East Palo Alto, California -- an ethnically diverse working-class enclave in Silicon Valley -- since 1995. Her organization received an \$850,000 TOP grant to open ten neighborhood technology centers.

"Department of Commerce funds have been extremely important to our growth," Escobar said. She is concerned that cutting off funds now to communities that have only recently come online will prevent the technology from being put to good use in education, development and job training.

"Nobody would claim that if people have paper and pens they know how to write," Escobar said. "Now is when the heavy lifting has to happen." Set in the heart of the IT world, Plugged In has a good mix of public and private funding, and Escobar predicted they would survive even without federal help. "But if I was some place else, this would be a tragedy," she said.

In addition to the TOP program, the funding for community technology centers administered through the Department of Education, which was set at \$32.5 million in 2002, is also set to be eliminated next year.



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