Resolution on the Digital Divide
Supporting Material
(accompanied amendment in 2013)

1. Rationale for why it merits Legislative Assembly consideration and how it meets the criteria for inclusion in the Public Policy Platform specified in the Preamble,

   The Digital Divide is one of the greatest communication issues of social equity that people of all nations face - it is an issue of information access and literacy becoming increasingly central to public discourse as well as economic, social, and cultural welfare at the individual, local, national, and international level. Much has happened regarding the divide since the original resolution 14 years ago, most notably a broadened focus on the Digital Divide as being an issue not only of access but also of usability and empowerment. As the principal scholarly entity in the field of communication studies, it is imperative for us to provide a timely statement that truly incorporates the increasingly prominent role of digital media as an integral component of human communication in our world today.

2. Background information regarding the public policy issue being addressed
   By the end of the 20th century, digital communication technologies had become an integral component of the modern economic, social, and cultural environment of many modern nations. Yet, the increased focus on networked technologies assumed all people to have connectivity - and this was not the case. Anecdotally, it seemed that divisions between those with and without access (the technology "haves" and "have-nots") seemed related among lines associated with social status indicators, and there were concerns that while networked technologies held great promise for society, a "rich get richer" situation was quickly becoming apparent with more privileged populations benefitting more from the technologies. In response to these observations, in 1995 the National Telecommunications and Information Administration released their first of a series of studies, "Falling Through the 'Net" to better understand the phenomenon, citing the Federal Communications Commissions broad charter of "universal service."

   In their reports, the NTIA detailed systematic gaps between populations with and without service - labeling the phenomenon as a "Digital Divide" and suggesting it to be an issue of great social, political and economic concern. Some of gaps identified in those early studies were found to be a function of geographic location (urban spaces being more connected), age (older populations were less connected), race (minorities were disproportionately unconnected), and income (poor populations were less connected). Follow-up studies into the early 2000s reported these access gaps to be closing with the falling cost of computing technology, such as a writing by technology scholar Jakob Nielsen who argued in 2006 that computer prices had fallen to levels largely within reach of most people. However (and we recognize that access concerns are still a concern), many argue that gaps in technology literacy and usage, often along the same socio-demographics found by the NTIA, exist still today.

   As a matter of public policy, it must be recognize that the Digital Divide is not closed. If broken down into the components suggested by Nielsen, we might understand the divide as

an issue of (a) access to the technology, (b) usability of the technology, and (c) empowerment from the technology. All three are equally important in understanding the larger socio-cultural issues of technology access, and are prominent issues that demand our academic attention.

3. Demonstration of the relationship of the issue to existing communication scholarship, including specific citations

Below, we have included key citations (with abstracts) that speak to the increased prominence of the Digital Divide as an area of focus among communication scholars.

- *The following are examples of chapters from this handbook that address issues relevant to NCA Policy; other chapters include analyses of ethnic minorities, older populations, and low-income households:*
    - Auh, S., Shulman, S. W., Thrane, L. E., & Shelley, M. C. (2010). Beyond the Digital Divide: Closing the generation and disability gaps? In E. Ferro (Ed.), *Handbook of research on overcoming Digital Divides: Constructing an equitable and competitive information society* (pp. 133-154). Hershey; Information Science Reference. doi: 10.4018/978-1-60566-699-0.ch008
      Abstract: An essential, and rapidly-developing, aspect of electronic government is the growing use of online resources for government activities such as e-rulemaking, citizen participation, and the provision of information, referral, and assistance for users with needs for service delivery. Major developments in the use of electronic government resources for services needed by the elder and disability populations are the primary focus of this chapter and on the findings from evaluations of aging and disability resource websites in the United States and in other countries.
    - Jackson, L., Fitzgerald, H. E., von Eye, A., Zhao, Y., & Witt, E. A. (2010). The Digital Divides in the U.S.: Access, broadband, and nature of Internet use. In E. Ferro (Ed.), *Handbook of research on overcoming Digital Divides: Constructing an equitable and competitive information society* (pp. 223-239). Hershey; Information Science Reference. doi: 10.4018/978-1-60566-699-0.ch012
      Abstract: The purpose of this chapter is to describe the Digital Divides in the U.S. in terms of access, broadband connectivity, intensity of Internet use, and nature of Internet use. These divides hold true for both adults and youth and have far-reaching implications for both groups, as well as for society as a whole. For the most part the Digital Divides center around race, income, and, to a lesser extent, gender. Because the Digital Divides are complex and multifaceted any approach to reduce or eliminate them must also be complex and multifaceted. We suggest ways that educational, community, government, and corporate resources can be brought to bear on eliminating the Digital Divides.
    - Loh, S. C. (2010). Generation, education, gender, and ethnicity in American Digital Divides. In E. Ferro (Ed.), *Handbook of research on overcoming Digital Divides: Constructing an equitable and competitive information society* (pp.196-222). Hershey; Information Science Reference. doi: 10.4018/978-1-60566-699-0.ch011

Abstract: Through increasing access to knowledge and facilitating widespread discourse, information and communication technology (ICT) is believed to hold the potential to level many societal barriers. Using national probability samples of United States adults from 1983 to 2006, I examine how gender, ethnicity, and education interacted with generation to influence computer ownership and Internet use. Narrower Digital Divides in more recent generations can mean greater future digital equality through cohort replacement. However, although gender is now of far less consequence than previously in ICT access and use, significant divides, especially in PC ownership and selected Internet uses have widened by ethnicity and education over five birth cohorts. On the other hand, results from earlier research interpreted as "aging effects" are most likely generational influences instead. Implications of these findings are discussed.

- *The following are recently published articles on the Digital Divide, several of which include authors from the field of communication:*

  - Epstein, D., & Nisbet, E. C. (2011). Who's responsible for the Digital Divide? Public perceptions and policy implications. *Information Society*, *27*, 92-104.
    Abstract: Addressing the reasons for-and the solutions to-the 'Digital Divide' has been on the public agenda since the emergence of the Internet. However, the term has meant quite different things, depending on the audience and the context, and these competing interpretations may in fact orient toward different policy outcomes. The goals of this article are twofold. First, the authors unpack the term 'Digital Divide' and examine how it has been deployed and interpreted across a range of academic and policy discourses. Second, through a framing experiment embedded within a nationally representative survey, the authors demonstrate how presenting respondents with two different conceptual frames of the Digital Divide may lead to different perceptions of who is most accountable for addressing the issue. From this, they discuss the dynamic relationship between the construction and communication of policy discourse and the public understanding of the Digital Divide, as well as implications for effective communication about the Digital Divide and information and communication technology policy to the general public.
  - James, J. (2011). Are changes in the Digital Divide consistent with global equality or inequality? *Information Society*, *27*, 121-128.
    Abstract: To answer the question in the title, the author divides a sample of developing countries according to whether they have experienced a rise or fall of the (absolute) Digital Divide in the Internet. He suggests that in countries where the divide is falling, incomes will tend to be relatively high, and vice versa in the case of a rising divide. This relationship is examined on the basis of simple regression analysis; the analysis indicates the hypothesis is true with a high level of significance. Interpretation of the findings is carried out mainly in relation to countries from Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. In short, recent changes in the Digital Divide are associated with global inequality rather than equality, although there are some important anomalies that need to be explained.

- Min, S-J. (2010). From the Digital Divide to the democratic divide: Internet skills, political interest, and the second-level Digital Divide in political Internet use. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, *7*, 22-35.
  Abstract: Digital Divide research is now focused on the so-called second-level divide, which concerns Internet "usage" divides. This article suggests that while the first-level divide was associated with sociodemographic factors, the second-level divide is associated with factors such as motivations and Internet skills. It then illustrates an example of the second-level Digital Divide—the democratic divide. The democratic divide concerns the differences between those who actively use the Web for politics and those who do not. Analysis of General Social Survey data shows there is a democratic divide where political Internet users are individuals with high Internet skills and political interest.
- Prieger, J. E. (2013). The broadband Digital Divide and the economic benefits of mobile broadband for rural areas. *Telecommunications Policy*, *37*, 483-502.
  Abstract: Broadband is becoming increasingly important to national economies and the personal lives of users. However, broadband availability and adoption are not diffusing in rural and urban areas at the same rates. This article updates the rural broadband Digital Divide, with special attention paid to mobility. Empirical estimations of broadband provision and usage in the US show that rural areas have fewer high-speed fixed and mobile providers but more slower-speed fixed providers than urban areas. While rural availability of mobile broadband is lower than in urban areas, it still helps fill in gaps in fixed broadband coverage in rural areas. The rural gap in fixed broadband usage remains, but the mobile broadband usage gap disappears after controlling for household demographics. The raw broadband usage gaps between rural and urban households are proportionally greater for low-income households. The potential for mobile broadband to benefit rural areas through economic development is also examined.
- Ruecker, T. (2012). Exploring the Digital Divide on the U.S.-Mexico border through literacy narratives. *New Literacy Narratives: Stories about Reading and Writing in a Digital Age, Computers and Composition*, *29*, 239-253.
  Abstract: Building upon the work of Scenters-Zapico's (2010) Generaciones, this article examines the digital literacy development and practices of two students passing through three different educational institutions on the U.S.-Mexico border. The author makes the argument that literacy narratives such as the ones shared here are vital for complementing the work done by broader quantitative studies on the Digital Divide, as they document differences that may be otherwise overlooked. In exploring the very different narratives of two students transitioning through high school and into a two-year college or four-year university, this article complicates understandings of the Digital Divide by exploring technological divides between educational institutions and the role that gateways, external sponsors, and self-sponsorship play in students' technological literacy development, especially when confronted with limitations on access. The discussion and findings have implications for writing program administrators as well as composition teachers and researchers, including those teaching in online environments.

- Tierna, F. F., & Fub, T-T. (2006). The correlates of the Digital Divide and their impact on college student learning. *Computers & Education*, *50*, 421-436. **Abstract:** By focusing on two dimensions of the Digital Divide—computer use and computer knowledge, this study explores four research questions: (1) What are the undergraduates doing with the computers they use at colleges? (2) How do undergraduates perform in regard to computer knowledge and skills? (3) With what is the Digital Divide among college students correlated? (4) What consequences does the Digital Divide have for student academic performance? In this study, the Digital Divide is measured in terms of computer use, which includes a variety of purposes for using computers and academic-related work as a proportion of total computer hours, and computer knowledge. The main findings include: (1) Undergraduates use computers not only for fulfilling their academic requirements and searching for information, but also for entertainment. On average, undergraduates spend about 19h per week using computers, of which 5h are academic-related. (2) Most undergraduates perform at the middle average level in terms of computer knowledge. (3) No significant differences among correlates in relating to demographic and socioeconomic family background were found in predicting the various purposes in using computers. (4) Students who are female, whose fathers and/or whose mothers are from minorities, whose fathers are blue-collar workers or unemployed, who study in the fields of the humanities and social sciences, and who enter private universities are at a disadvantage in terms of computer skills and knowledge. However, female students, students whose mothers were less educated and students who enroll in private universities are more focused computer users in terms of allocating time to academic-related work. (5) Computer knowledge and devotion to using computers for academic-related work have a moderate effect on college student learning, while the various other uses of computers do not.

4. Specific action being requested of policy makers
   Primary actions being requested are an acceptance of and commitment to:
   A. Awareness that a systematic Digital Divide exists across several socio-demographic variables at the individual, local, national and international level
   B. Understanding how universal access to communication technologies is necessary for improving economic, social, and cultural welfare of citizens
   C. Advocating for programs and policies that (a) improve access to free and low-cost communication technologies; (b) enhance citizens' comfort and skill with communication technologies; and (c) imbue citizens with a sense of empowerment and a knowledge of the benefits of communication technology use.

5. Specific actions the Association will be expected to take if the resolution passes
   As a resolution largely focused on awareness of Digital Divide issues rather than deliberate actions for addressing the issue "head-on," NCA's commitment to awareness would largely take the role of public address and advocacy. In this, NCA might be expected to engage in education campaigns designed to address specific publics – starting with internal publics within the organization (such as Association members and university students) and perhaps expanding out to more lay-publics. These campaigns might include (a) digital press kits

highlighting the history and contemporary issues of the Digital Divide, (b) a digital repository of key readings and research findings associated with the Digital Divide, (c) sponsoring, co-sponsoring, and/or organizing lecture series on Digital Divide topics, and (d) actively promoting qualified members of NCA to local, national, and international press to discuss scholarship related to the Digital Divide.

6. An explicit statement of the resolution

   The National Communication Association (NCA) reaffirms its commitment to urge the development of free and low-cost ways of accessing the means for processing and distributing information in electronic forms. Moreover, NCA continues to urge the development of communication technologies that require minimal training but that still allow wide use of worldwide electronic resources. Additionally, as electronic resources continue to become increasingly demanding in terms of bandwidth, NCA asks that service providers ensure connection speeds necessary to competently utilize said resources. Moreover, while many argue that economic barriers to technology have been greatly reduced, technology and information literacy barriers must be addressed with equal attention so that those with access to technology are able to use it effectively. Given these commitments, NCA resolves to take a leadership role in closing the Digital Divide through scholarship highlighting access, usability, and empowerment issues. NCA officers and staff will support legislation aimed at providing universal access to electronic means of communication. NCA will work with other organizations to ensure that communities in the U.S. and elsewhere have adequate electronic communication resources available to all. NCA members have a responsibility to increase awareness of the Digital Divide as a comprehensive social issue that considers socio-economic as well as literacy and empowerment dimensions. NCA urges its members to take an active role in increasing awareness of the Digital Divide through research, education, incorporating material on this problem into courses, through community consultation and education, and by advocating for appropriate policies at all levels of government, as well as supporting the production and distribution of open source software, as well as continued education on using said software.

7. Consideration of how this fits with the rest of the current public policy platform, and

   The current public policy platform of NCA includes statements on Political Communication and Extended Solitary Confinement and Torture in an effort to highlight issues of communication central to free and fair political discourse (the former) and improper and injurious usage of communication (the latter). Similarly, our proposed resolution on the Digital Divide locates communication as central to a civil, connected, and collaborative digital society. In some respects, we might suggest that the Digital Divide - given that many of the technical concerns related to the ability to physically connect to digital networks have been addressed by advances in computer science (and to a smaller extent, public policy) - is an issue uniquely associated with the study of human communication. While issues of physical connectivity are still important, the individual, relational and societal implications of the manner in which humans interact using these connections has become a central debate of the 21st century.

8. An assessment of the resources required (both financial and human) to implement the resolution (to be determined in consultation with the Executive Director) and justification for priority of this expenditure

In Point five above, we specify four main types of education and advocacy activities that NCA might consider:

- (a) digital press kits highlighting the history and contemporary issues of the Digital Divide,
    - Resources here might include space on the current www.natcom.org webpage, perhaps maintained but the current public relations staff working in tandem with NCA members. No additional financial costs are expected, with human costs being minimal (current staff and members).
- (b) a digital repository of key readings and research findings associated with the Digital Divide, and
    - Again, resources for such a repository would likely include space on the current www.natcom.org webpage. Financial costs might include potential copyright permissions for distributing some proprietary information. Human costs should be minimal (current staff and members).
- (c) sponsoring and/or organizing lecture series on Digital Divide topics.
    - Financial costs associated with this might include speaker's fees and honoraria, travel arrangements and accommodation expenses for hosting speakers, as well as costs associated with organizing speaking spaces
    - Human costs would include identifying people to coordinate such events - including current public relations staff and NCA members - that would be asked to contribute time outside of the normal scope of their positions.
- (d) actively promoting qualified members of NCA to local, national, and international press to discuss scholarship related to the Digital Divide.

Note that we see the first and second points here as mission-critical to NCA's interest in promoting this policy statement (assuming an active rather than a passive advocacy role), while the third point as more tangential.

Previous Resolution

Digital Divide

(adopted by the NCA Legislative Council, November 1999)

The National Communication Association reaffirms its commitment to urge the development of free and low-cost ways of accessing the means for processing and distributing information in electronic forms. Moreover, NCA continues to urge the development of hardware and software that requires minimal training but that still allows wide use of worldwide electronic resources. Given these commitments, the National Communication Association resolves to take a leadership role in closing the digital divide. NCA officers and staff should support legislation aimed at providing universal access to electronic means of communication. NCA should work with other organizations to ensure that communities in the U.S. and elsewhere have adequate electronic communication resources available to all. NCA urges its members to take an active role in increasing awareness of the digital divide through research, incorporating material on this problem into courses, through community consultation and education, and by advocating for appropriate policies at the state and local levels, as well as supporting the production and distribution of open source software.