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Digitally excluded: Separate & unequal

By RICHARD VOITH & GREG GOLDMAN

SOCIAL MEDIA and digital inclusion is the focus of today's Greater Philadelphia Martin Luther King Day of Service, and we applaud this effort to call attention to limited Internet access among minority, low-income, less-educated and older Americans.

Some may question whether digital inclusion is merely an unnecessary luxury for entertainment and personal communication. Should we really care whether low-income children and adults can access Facebook or YouTube?

But with a moment's thought, even casual observers should realize that digital exclusion limits the educational opportunities available to excluded children and adults. And the educational importance of Internet access can only increase in the future as public schools and municipal governments find themselves less and less able to provide wide access to traditional hard-copy educational materials.

The fact is that Internet access provides much more than e-mail, entertainment and education. Digital exclusion limits access to news, health-care information, competitively priced goods and services, transportation information, public-safety and emergency-response information, e-government services and low-cost personal financial-management systems such as Internet banking.

AND DIGITALLY excluded teenagers and adults have much more difficulty seeking and finding employment because many employers and government employment services depend on the Internet to locate and place prospective workers.

A study last year by the Digital Impact Group and Econsult Corp. provided the first comprehensive estimates of the many economic costs of digital exclusion in America, which total more than \$55 billion a year.

Another striking finding of the study was that very large potential benefits of universal Internet access would go to all individual, business and government users of the Internet, not just to those currently excluded.

For example, as we've already noted, universal Internet access would enhance the process of matching job candidates with job opportunities. Better-functioning labor markets would lead not only to higher employment but also to higher profits for employers and stronger economic growth for all.

Other examples of widespread benefits abound.

By optimizing the generation of electricity that users want, smart-energy systems can lower

electricity costs and minimize environmental costs for all, but such systems will produce the largest savings for all only if all electricity users are connected to those systems through the Internet.

Similarly, public-safety and emergency-response systems will be more efficient and nimble if there is universal access.

And, more generally, universal Internet access would provide substantial savings to businesses and government agencies that are currently forced to maintain old-fashioned systems to ensure access for those who are digitally excluded.

Besides generating economic benefits for all, universal access would facilitate civic engagement of many types.

Marginalized individuals can come together in cyberspace to pursue their common goals. Today, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, co-founded by King, is only one of myriad advocacy organizations that use the Internet to pursue their members' goals.

Looking ahead, if Internet voting is just around the corner, as many believe, then universal access would dramatically strengthen the franchise of groups who are digitally excluded today.

For decades, this country emphasized and invested in universal access to telephones and what we now call "snail-mail."

Both were considered essential services, and both generated what economists call "network externalities" - as more and more parties were connected to our national phone and mail systems, all connected parties derived more and more value from those networks.

Today we have similar, and perhaps even stronger, rationales for investment in universal Internet access, which is essential for equality of opportunity and which promises substantial network externalities for all of society.

We can think of no better way to honor King's legacy today than to call for universal digital inclusion as a crucial step toward his vision of equality and a better life for all people.

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