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A new digital divide has emerged — and conventional solutions won't bridge the gap



By Blair Levin and Larry Downes October 14

Though the United States has made profound progress in making Internet access universally available, a new digital divide has emerged that defies conventional solutions.

Since both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump have promised to expand broadband opportunities if elected president, it's crucial for future policy decisions that we understand who is still offline and why. According to the most recent findings of the Pew Research Center, 13 percent of Americans still do not use the Internet.

Of that group, the most telling variable is no longer race, sex or even income. It's age. Over 40 percent of seniors are offline, compared with 1 percent of millennials. Two other groups stand out as digital holdouts — rural Americans (22 percent) and those with less than a high school education (34 percent).

This is our new digital divide. And closing the inclusion gap demands a

significant change in strategy.

So far, public and private efforts have focused on access and affordability.

Based on recommendations in the 2010 National Broadband Plan, the Federal Communications Commission has transformed its subsidy programs from ensuring dial-tone for the poorest Americans into support for broadband service, as well as updating how we connect schools, libraries and other civic institutions.

Further, leading Internet providers, including Comcast, AT&T and, recently, Sprint, have expanded programs aimed at low-income families, signing up millions of new Internet users for roughly \$10 a month.

But while income undoubtedly continues to play a significant role, many who remain offline wouldn't use the Internet even if it were free. A report just out from the Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration finds, consistent with earlier surveys, that over half of those who don't have Internet service at home say they don't want or need it.

Given the Internet's growing importance for education, health care and jobs, non-adopters are tragically mistaken about relevance. So the focus needs to be on persuading them to join us. And join us they must. The more users who join the network, the faster each added connection increases its value. The silence of older, rural and less-educated Americans from the online conversation makes all of us that much poorer.

The new digital divide can only be bridged by making digital life more relevant. And there's a relatively simple way to do it. Older, rural, and less-educated Americans share one important characteristic — they are all heavy users of government services. For example, 53 percent of benefits go to people 65 and older. Migrating entitlements to easy-to-use applications, and providing training through community-based groups, will make the Internet essential, if not irresistible, to those still disconnected.

What are those apps? For older Americans, they include one-stop shopping for information about Social Security, Medicare, and tailored services, such as telehealth. For rural users, as well as those with less education, key services are those that help with both education and employment: matching résumés with openings, signing up for vocational education for in-demand positions and financial aid. Health insurance and child welfare services are also critical.

Different federal and state government agencies today provide these benefits, and in many cases, some information is already online. But we need apps that pull together relevant information across government and agency boundaries and a design that is focused on convenience for the user. Deploying them quickly would not only increase online adoption but also simultaneously improve government performance and lower its cost.

To jump-start these vital services, we need to harness entrepreneurial talent focused on building the next great gaming or social media sensation. Happily, that is precisely the mission of the recently created U.S. Digital Service, which recruits top designers, engineers, product managers and policy experts and pairs them with forward-thinking civil servants, deploying high-powered teams “to untangle the most important government services.”

There's also Data.gov, which has released nearly 200,000 government data sets open to “civic hackers, tech entrepreneurs, data scientists, and developers of all stripes.” Hundreds of apps have already been built.

Redirecting and unleashing these innovative resources on the services most urgently needed by Internet non-adopters would turbocharge long-standing efforts to get government services online. Focusing on older, rural and less-educated users would, at the same time, erase the most stubborn obstacle remaining for digital inclusion. And get it done in record time.

All it would take is a little leadership.

As transition teams for the next administration begin setting priorities, closing the digital gap for good could prove an early, and important, win on

many fronts.

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