



THE NEW ERA OF BROADBAND AND DEMOCRACY—

A PATHWAY TO DIGITAL
INCLUSIVENESS

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As part of a historic effort to revitalize the economy, President Barack Obama signed into law the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act* (“ARRA” or “Recovery Act”), pumping over \$700 billion of economic “stimulus” dollars into the U.S. economy. Focused on providing

funding toward projects that promote employment opportunities for American workers, strengthen national infrastructure and expand upon renewable energy sources, the ARRA seeks to stimulate growth and to create jobs in a number of sectors. One aspect of ARRA funding has been designated

to support broadband opportunities by providing \$7.2 billion in funding to projects aimed at expanding rural and urban broadband deployment, mapping, adoption and support for public computer centers.

The administration's investment in broadband infrastructure signals the country's acceptance of how the Internet is rapidly changing how we live, learn and earn in our society. A growing number of people have the ability to find a job, enroll in public healthcare programs, locate childcare or complete a college course due to the availability of high-speed broadband. Importantly, citizens are increasingly using digital media to deepen their engagement in politics, to voice their opinions on issues that matter to them and to

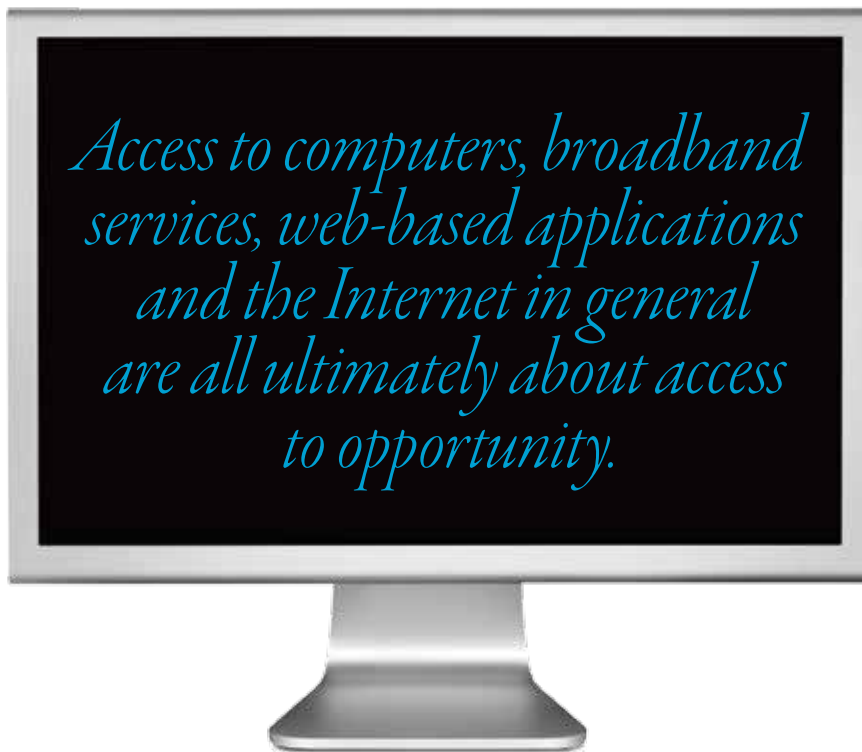
adult population—went online in 2008 to get involved in the political process or to get news and information about the election.¹ While these trends are promising, deliberate efforts to address the affordability, availability and adoption of broadband will be critical, especially to bringing more African Americans and other people of color into our reinvigorated democracy. This article focuses on broadband expansion and offers recommendations for addressing barriers to adoption.

Until recently, many scholars perceived the Internet as a medium that would hamper the gains of democracy. In his article *Surfing Alone: The Internet Communities, Public Opinion and Civic Participation* (2005),

are online, the less likely they are engaged in traditional, physical spaces that promote intimacy—whether at a parent teacher association meeting or a baseball game. Claiming the Internet as a “threat to social capital in postmodern societies”² was, at best, a wrong assumption, especially as people look to the web to identify, share and solve social problems. More people are effectively using social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and Gather to not only build communities of similar interests, but to galvanize individuals around common causes.³

The power of the Internet to mobilize people around specific issues and encourage their feedback through next generation web tools that include blogging, podcasting and wikis suggests the revitalization, not degradation, of American democracy. The web is increasingly becoming the core of how we learn about and connect to social issues; and, the rapid convergence of the Internet with radio and television is making this process even more seamless. In a recent assessment of the President's first one hundred days in office, news anchors used live interactive polls hosted on their network's Web sites to gather public opinion. Viewers literally registered their votes in real time on a variety of questions that were compiled and reported to the public within minutes. High-speed broadband has also made it possible for people to organize and share their own opinions in the form of blogs.⁴ Technorati, a firm that tracks blog activities, reports that over 175,000 new weblogs are created daily—indeed, more than two blogs are created each second of the day. While blogs can cover a range of topics, bloggers are rapidly reengineering how public opinion gets created and vetted by ordinary citizens.

By definition, democracy means government by the people. Democracy speaks to the ability of the people to voice their opinions about the issues that affect their daily lives,



proclaim support for their favorite candidates and their policy positions. A recent study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that “some 74 percent of Internet users—representing 55 percent of the entire

Frank Rusciano pointed to a degradation in social capital, especially as the Internet prompted people to lose sight of their ability to share and form physical relationships with one another. Thus, the more people

1 Smith, Aaron, 2009, “The Internet's Role in Campaign 2008.” Pew Internet and American Life Project (<http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/6--The-Internets-Role-in-Campaign-2008.aspx>).

2 Rusciano, Frank Louis, 2005, “Surfing Alone: Internet Communities, Public Opinion and Civic Participation.” Public Opinion Pros Publication.

3 Since its launch in 2007, *Causes* introduced to over 175 million Facebook users has been the leader in getting individuals aligned with the missions of various organizations.

4 Blogs can be comprised of commentary, description of events, audio file or video graphic.

from education to the environment. Having the ability to fully exercise this right is one of the most intriguing opportunities of the new digital world. The new communications technologies can give voice to the voiceless and provide a forum for the exchange of ideas that improves the quality of life for all Americans.

When government uses broadband effectively, more people are able to benefit. The Benton Foundation's publication, *Using Technology and Innovation to Address Our Nation's Critical Challenges*, shares that the deployment of universal broadband and related applications offers a "tremendous opportunity to reenergize government, making it more efficient, transparent, accountable and open to the active participation of the citizens it serves, while generating cost savings in the billions of dollars."⁵ The report cited the following examples of how government agencies and multilateral organizations benefit from ubiquitous broadband access:

- The federal Office of Management and Budget reported to Congress that certain federal e-government initiatives resulted in benefits totaling \$508 million in fiscal year 2008.
- The United Nations has estimated that e-government initiatives can result in cost savings of 10-50 percent.
- The U.S. Department of Commerce, focusing only on savings in procurements, has estimated annual savings of \$49 billion by the federal government and \$58 billion by state and local governments.⁶

Government use of web 2.0 applications further promotes efficiency when citizens are able to point out waste, fraud and abuse. Examples of best practices in this area include the bipartisan *Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act of 2006*, sponsored by then Senator Barack Obama

and co-sponsored by Senator John McCain, creating *USASpending.gov*, which launched in December 2007.⁷ *Recovery.gov* is another example of how the government is using the web to keep citizens updated on the administration's stimulus plans. Government can obviously do more in this space to deepen citizen engagement in the political process.

Barriers to Adoption

The digitization of our democracy is not without challenges. Disparities in digital access exist as issues around broadband affordability, availability and adoption, especially for African Americans and other people of color. Unfortunately, cost is still a factor in an individual's choice to become a broadband subscriber. Where broadband is and is not available is yet another issue, especially when examining the lack of broadband service in rural communities or and densely poor neighborhoods within large metropolitan areas. Finally, factors that determine who gets online and why broadband gets adopted impact the full utilization of the service.

Racial, cultural and economic demographics still determine to some extent why some people get online faster than others. Over the years, the disparities in Internet access between whites and blacks have slowly narrowed, yet income levels still define who benefits. The glaring statistics generated by a 2005 report published by The Children's Partnership indicated that children from families with annual incomes over \$75,000 are twice as likely to have access to a computer at home than those from very low-income families; 96 percent compared to 45 percent. Couple the absence of computer hardware with the lack of affordable broadband and the situation worsens for lower income children, who are omitted from educational and workforce development opportunities afforded by the digital age. Not surprisingly,

Latinos still trail whites and other minority groups in computer ownership, Internet use and e-commerce.⁸ The global consequences of these inequalities contribute to the lack of digital preparedness for low-income students or limited digital proficiency among workers.

The University of Minnesota's Institute on Race and Poverty found that digital inclusion has the greatest potential to benefit the very communities in which it is sorely lacking. The report asserts:

Access to computers, broadband services, web-based applications and the Internet in general are all ultimately about access to opportunity. Life opportunities including living wage employment, housing that is affordable to local residents, social and health services conveniently located and priced, good quality public educational systems, and more.⁹

An additional challenge is the speed of government in adopting broadband applications that foster a national culture of use. Archaic social service delivery systems often discourage government from moving *online*, opting to keep people *in line* when enrolling in public benefit programs or identifying supportive services. Current applications available on state and federal Web sites are in need of a major overhaul to make content accessible, easy to navigate and more reflective of our national differences—whether language, literacy or ability. Spending the time and money to make government web portals more efficient and transparent are steps to reinvigorate civic participation and to promote adoption.

Pathway to Digital Inclusiveness

The creation of an inclusive digital ecosystem is the first recommendation in ensuring equal access to broadband resources. Digital access must be made available at public institutions

5 Benton Foundation, 2009, "Using Technology and Innovation to Address Our Nation's Critical Challenges", Benton Foundation.

6 Benton Foundation, 2009, "Using Technology and Innovation to Address Our Nation's Critical Challenges", Benton Foundation.

7 Benton Foundation, 2009, "Using Technology and Innovation to Address Our Nation's Critical Challenges", Benton Foundation. On USASpending.gov, information about federal grants, contracts, loans and other financial information are available to the general public.

8 See research done by Tomas Rivera Policy Institute, April 2002.

9 Digital Justice in Minnesota: Progress towards Digital Inclusion, 2005.

(e.g., schools, libraries, park districts and hospitals) and within the home if it is going to be that driver that reinvigorates equal opportunity. Housing mandates, especially an Executive Order with earmarked funding, could ensure that an in-home broadband connection is no longer just a perk for those with means, but a utility for every American household. One Economy Corporation, a global non-profit committed to accelerating access for the poor, has changed housing policy in several states to bring an in-home broadband connection to over 350,000 units of affordable housing. By leveraging the low-income housing tax credit and redirecting funds towards broadband deployment, thousands of families that would have declined the service are now benefiting from free or low cost access.

Programs that serve to create digital opportunities for communities of color, low income populations and in rural and urban areas are also essential in promoting broadband adoption. Individuals require free or affordable hardware that allows them access to the web and public purpose content that supports and ultimately improves their quality of life. While getting online can be a huge step for disempowered citizens, there are enormous rewards for them in the educational, employment and financial

benefits offered through the web. On this same point, mobilizing young people, especially those from communities of color, around new technology strengthens America's position in the global marketplace. One Economy's *Digital Connectors* program is a prime model for increasing digital literacy in communities where broadband adoption is stagnant. Exposed to leadership principles, digital education and community service, nearly 3,000 youth have contributed more than 56,000 hours of service in the last four years. Young people are training local residents on how to use the Internet, building computer labs and creating robust media content that focuses on hope instead of despair in inner cities, farm communities, barrios and tribal nations.

The integration of new media and social networking tools into governmental portals is a final recommendation to strengthen the participation of people of color in our reinvigorated democracy. Arming disenfranchised communities with the means to conduct virtual town halls that get them closer to elected officials and other decisionmakers can potentially strengthen democracy and ease tensions that arise when people and organizations feel disempowered. Multilingual, multi-abled and literacy inclusive national town halls can serve to

solicit and acknowledge the voices of the people, while simultaneously bringing people together around common concerns and issues.

As Request for Proposals are prepared by government agencies to support the distribution of ARRA grants towards broadband opportunity programs, a degree of intentionality must exist that drives stimulus funds to serve low-income and disenfranchised groups. People of color, low-income and socially isolated citizens must be first in line to encourage their engagement in our new democracy. With the legacy of Jim Crow segregation behind us, this new era offers opportunities to create a new story that connects people to one another, and encourages collective action that serves to better our nation.

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