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Quinn: The growth in 'underconnected' Californians should alarm us

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At first glance, the latest data on California's digital divide looks like amazingly good news.

A whopping 84 percent of Californians now have access to broadband internet at home, up 9 percentage points since 2014, according to a new Field Poll.

At that rate, the digital divide -- the gulf between the information haves and have nots -- could be wiped out in less than three years.

But most of those gains have come from increased smartphone use. In the past year alone, there's been a near doubling -- from 8 percent to 14 percent -- of state residents now online because of smartphones. Meanwhile, the percentage of Californians connecting to the internet via a laptop or a desktop has remained flat for several years.

"That is the biggest problem," said Mark DiCamillo, director of The Field Poll, which conducted the survey for the California Emerging Technology Fund, a nonprofit focused on broadband deployment and adoption.

It's worth celebrating that more Californians are online. But it's alarming that outside of smartphones, the same old digital divide persists and keeps minorities, the poor and many seniors from reaping the riches of the information age. It's not for lack of trying. Companies such as Comcast, AT&T, Charter and Frontier now offer less expensive broadband access to eligible low-income households. State and federal government officials have been trying to expand broadband for years.

"We need to invest more funds in getting low income people, particularly school children, devices that work at home that are not smartphones," said Tamara Straus, a spokesperson with the California Emerging Technology Fund, which was established in 2006 by the state's Public Utility Commission and funded as a result of two telecom mergers. "It's really important for education and digital literacy. That's really the divide."

Sure, being connected via a smartphone is better than nothing. But there's more to being online than tapping out an email or surfing the web. Smartphones, even with all they do, are still limited devices.

It's hard to do homework on an iPhone, look at a spreadsheet or access electronic medical records. You can't apply to college on a Samsung Galaxy or use one to take an online class. Smartphone banking has a ways to go before it is easy and commonplace. And some data plans cap your use.

The result? In addition to the 13 percent of Californians who do not have access to broadband internet at home, another 14 percent are "underconnected" because they can only get online via their smartphones. That's about one-third of Californians with limited or no broadband access. (The Field Poll findings have a sampling error of +/-2.6 percentage points).

The digital divide reflects our socio-economic divisions. Talk about two Californias. Just 43 percent of Golden State residents with incomes less than \$22,000 access the internet through a computer or laptop compared to 94 percent of those with incomes of \$100,000 or more.

People with the least education and the lowest incomes, as well as Spanish-speaking Latinos, are more likely to be part of this digital underclass. For example, 63 percent of people without a high school degree are connected, up an astonishing 31 percentage points since 2014, but practically all of that gain has been from smartphone use.

Likewise, 69 percent of Spanish-speaking Latinos are connected, up 23 percentage points, with 30 percent using smartphones only to get online. The digital divide still hits older Californians harder, too. They haven't seen the smartphone boost other groups have experienced. Just 56 percent of those 65 and older are connected, a 9 percentage point gain, and just 5 percentage points of that came from smartphone-only use.

There's more that can be done. The biggest thing preventing people from owning a computer and getting online is cost. Companies can do more to provide free or low-cost devices to customers, more Wi-Fi hot spots and more funds for broadband infrastructure.

But the digital divide should be a call to Silicon Valley technologists, who are working on the next generation of smartphones and apps: Make smartphones even more useful.

What else can you do?

The digital divide is not about just about laptop brands and broadband speeds. It's about equality -- who gets access to information and opportunity that others take for granted. Those who are being left behind are doing their best to catch up by using smartphones. We shouldn't make it so hard.

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