

Why smartphones alone won't close the digital divide



BY SUNNE WRIGHT MCPEAK
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There is much to celebrate in the Field Poll's annual survey on the "digital divide" in California. The percentage of Californians with high-speed internet at home has risen to 84 percent in 2016 from 55 percent in 2008.

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OPINION

But the divide between those who have broadband at home and those who do not is closing largely because of smartphones. The

2016 survey found that among the 84 percent with home broadband, 14 percent are connecting only through their smartphones. This percentage is a near doubling of smartphone-only users since last year.

No doubt, smartphones are marvelous devices that provide access to information and online applications. But they are limited functionally for doing school homework, applying for jobs or college or taking online courses.

The problem is that those who rely only on smartphones are the very people most in need of the upward economic mobility enhanced by internet-connected computing devices.

Look at the numbers: According to the 2016 Field Poll, the California subgroups most likely to have broadband connectivity at home only through smartphones are adults who have not graduated from high school (29 percent), households whose total annual income is less than \$22,000 (25 percent), Latinos (24 percent), Spanish-speaking households (30 percent) and households whose annual income is less than \$40,000 (19 percent).

These segments of our population are a new demographic for policymakers to understand – the “underconnected” who are being left behind at an accelerating pace.

A recent study from Rutgers University found “smartphone-only users” were much less likely to visit government or community websites, bank online, communicate with their doctor or take an online class. The recent Field Poll numbers underscore that the digital divide is another manifestation of the economic divide and the opportunity divide.

What can be done?

Given that cost – broadband subscription coupled with computing devices – is by far the biggest factor preventing households from going online, the California Legislature and internet service companies should partner to ensure that all eligible low-income Californians receive broadband plans of \$10 to \$15 per month with affordable computers. Schools in low-income

neighborhoods should provide computing devices to all students and train their parents, so that the devices can be used at home for class assignments and tracking of children's academic progress.

Affordable monthly plans already are available for low-income households from Comcast, AT&T, Frontier, Cox and Mobile Citizen, with Charter soon to launch its affordable product. However, many of the companies have restrictions on which households are eligible. The FCC will commence its broadband program – “Lifeline” – in December to provide a \$9.25 monthly subsidy to internet companies, although it is not clear how that \$9.25 subsidy will be applied.

The Legislature also needs to pass the Internet for All Now Act and ensure ongoing modest investment in closing the digital divide. Foundations need to support proven digital access strategic initiatives, such as the California Telehealth Network, School2Home and community organizations with expertise in reaching disadvantaged populations.

California also must finish the job of deploying broadband infrastructure in the state's rural and remote areas. According to an April 2016 California Public Utilities Commission report, only 43 percent of rural households have access to reliable broadband service – likely increasing their reliance on mobile devices. The 2017 statewide goal of 98 percent broadband infrastructure access will not be reached unless the Legislature passes additional policy.

California remains the Golden State when it comes to advanced technology, but it is also a place where the gulf between rich and poor has widened. We can help narrow that gap by closing the digital divide – yet we cannot do it with smartphones only.

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