America's Moral Obligation for Universal Broadband

BY: [Jabari Simama](#) | August 24, 2020

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the lives and livelihoods of so many Americans confirms a belief many of us held two decades ago: that someday broadband would be as essential to modern life as clean water and electricity. We made this prediction amid some snickering and heckling by academic and government types, but we believed, as I wrote in my book *Civil Rights to Cyber Rights*, that we had "a moral obligation to see that broadband becomes universally accessible and beneficial to the public."

We envisioned a wired nation where all important social functions would be performed in a virtual town square or from smart homes. Not only has this not happened, but COVID-19 has brought to light just how unprepared we are as a nation to function in this type of online environment despite the United States' head start in the development of the Internet. Now is the time to move forcefully to address this unfulfilled moral obligation.

Our idea of "universally accessible" was not a call for the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) to strictly regulate the Internet as it did telephony, but we anticipated that there would come a time when the public might heavily rely on the Internet and citizens without it would be at a distinct disadvantage — economically, educationally and socially. Unfortunately, this time has come, and after six months of making a go at it, far too many still are not prepared to function in a virtual world. An estimated 35 percent of Black households and 29 percent of Hispanic households are [still without a broadband connection](#).

It's not that there haven't been serious attempts to close this gap. Some programs, like [Atlanta's computer literacy program](#) that I helped devise in the early 2000s, made noble efforts to meet the challenges. At the network of 25 public technology centers our program established, we emphasized the importance of intergenerational digital literacy. Sadly, after a successful five-year stint, subsequent city leaders closed this program for a variety of reasons, including a lack of funding.

And more recently we've seen some helpful efforts. The federal pandemic stimulus package passed in March [included funding](#) that can help schools meet their technological needs as they grapple with how and when to reopen. Private-sector programs like [Comcast's Get Our Kids Connected](#) are helping to bridge the divide for underserved households. And some local governments [have been stepping up](#) during the pandemic with their own programs to advance digital equity.

But broadband access isn't the only issue. It's also about speed. Applications such as the high-definition video necessary for distance education, telehealth and the transfer of large files from and to work require download speeds far in excess of the 25 megabits per second that the FCC sets as the benchmark. The FCC [reported in 2018](#) that the U.S. ranked 10th out of 28 countries for Internet speeds. Other reports rank the U.S. as low as 20th.

Because of our governments' and the public's failure to act quickly, consistently and responsibly, it's clear that the pandemic is going to be with us for a while, and matters could get worse. But as much as the pandemic is a challenge, the urgency it presents also provides an opportunity to finally make significant progress on these digital issues. To get started and provide a framework for future action, I recommend focusing on the following:

• Developing statewide broadband plans that marshal the resources of the private sector as well as those of state and local governments and that focus on preparedness for future pandemics.

• Meeting with broadband-industry leaders to discuss how best to make broadband ubiquitous, affordable and robust enough to run our economy, schools, government and civil society for extended periods of time.

• Inviting local governments and school districts to join in to discuss best practices to equip schools, community and recreation centers, and workforce-development facilities with computers and facilitators to help residents on a mass scale become digitally literate. Local officials should set benchmarks for digital literacy and for published results.

I find no solace in knowing that we predicted the importance of broadband two decades ago and witnessed insufficient action from all levels of government and industry. With so many Americans hurting because of the effects of the coronavirus, immediate action is required. By learning from the past, public officials can fulfill their moral obligation to see that broadband finally does become universally accessible and beneficial to the public.

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