

Remarks of Commissioner Mignon L. Clyburn
“A National Digital Literacy Corps to Meet the Adoption Challenge”
Digital Inclusion Summit
March 9, 2010

Thank you, Alberto and to your wonderful team. It is fitting that the FCC partnered with the Knight Foundation to organize America’s Digital Inclusion Summit. For decades, the Foundation has worked at the local level to develop informed and engaged communities. So it is no surprise to see the Foundation join the FCC in today’s conversation about broadband adoption. Growing broadband adoption is essential to ensuring that all Americans can be informed and can participate in our democracy. This undertaking requires a group effort of the most ambitious kind – federal, state, and local governments, private companies and non-profits, as well as neighbors, friends, and family members.

I have made no secret of my interest in broadband adoption since my first days at the Commission. To that end, I have met periodically with the Broadband’s Adoption & Use Team to discuss the direction of their work. I have been impressed with the commitment and hard work these dedicated public servants have shown. They met with many interested parties – including some of you here today – and considered, debated, and refined countless numbers of ideas. I salute the team for their contribution to the Plan, especially under such tight deadlines.

Broadband is one of our generation’s most important challenges, primarily because it presents one of our most monumental opportunities. Universal broadband and the skills to use it can lower barriers of means and distance to help achieve a more equal opportunity for all Americans.

It can provide the same level of education to a young student in Mountainair, New Mexico, as one in Northwest Washington, D.C. It can bring quality healthcare to men and women in extremely rural areas, without them having to drive several hours for a routine, but essential screening. It can allow men and women with disabilities to live more independently, wherever they choose. They could telecommute and run businesses from their homes, or receive rehabilitation therapy in remote and rural areas.

But the potential for broadband to be an equalizing force will not be realized if we fail to act. Rather than closing the opportunity gap, absent action, the individual and societal costs of digital exclusion will only multiply.

Want to find a job? More and more companies are listing jobs exclusively online. If you don’t have Internet access, these opportunities will pass you by.

Want to start a business? Today, competitive small businesses can grow, by using world-class IT systems in the cloud, and reaching a global market. But not if they don’t have broadband.

Want your children to have a quality education? The Internet can open the door to information sources around the world. Parents can communicate more directly with teachers and school officials to stay involved and shape their children's education. But these opportunities will not be realized if some students and parents have Internet access at home and others do not.

As political dialogue moves to online forums; as the Internet becomes the comprehensive source of real-time news and information; and as the easiest access to our government becomes email or a Web site, then those who are offline become increasingly disenfranchised.

Until recently, not having broadband was simply an inconvenience. Now it's becoming *essential* to opportunity and even citizenship. As I have said before, if the adoption gap is not addressed soon, today's digital divide will soon transform into a digital canyon.

Altogether, 93 million Americans do not have broadband at home. And adoption rates are much lower among certain populations, including rural Americans [50%], the elderly [65%], persons with disabilities [42%], low-income Americans [40%], African Americans [59%], and Hispanics [49%]. Among the 13 million children between the ages of 5 and 17 who do not have broadband at home, 6 million are either Hispanic or African American. These disparities won't just disappear over time if we sit back and do nothing.

Achieving our goals will require an understanding of why individuals choose not to adopt. I often call this inquiry "the last half-mile." You see, we often talk about the broadband challenge as finding the way to lay the "last mile" of infrastructure. In the past, many people assumed that once the physical pipes were laid, our job was complete. We now know, however, that bringing broadband to people's homes is only half the challenge. The other half – the other half-mile, so to speak – is understanding exactly why each particular non-adopting consumer has chosen to take that path. There is no one-size-fits-all solution here. It is a community-by-community proposition, and we have to be willing to work locally to get this job done.

One step in the right direction is the rigorous and ambitious consumer adoption study undertaken by the Commission's broadband team – and in particular, Dr. John Horrigan. This research identified three key obstacles to adoption:

The first is affordability. The number one reason people cite for being offline is cost. Some might be in the position of having to choose between paying for basic necessities or paying for broadband, while others might not see the value of broadband relative to other things they could pay for like cable TV.

The second is digital literacy. Many Americans lack the basic understanding of how to locate trustworthy content, how to protect personal information, and how to safely interact online.

The third is relevance. Many Americans don't understand the potential benefits that broadband offers for *them*.

In reality, the majority of non-adopters face multiple barriers. For example, a person may not believe broadband to be relevant to his life and therefore he may never develop digital skills to use the technology. Or, another person may not have sufficient funds to subscribe to a broadband service, but also be wary of what may happen to her if she goes on-line.

Anyway we look at it, for approximately a third of American households, we have a substantial broadband adoption challenge ahead of us.

So how do we tackle this challenge?

Based on the survey research about barriers, online behaviors, and non-adopters' attitudes, as well as the Commission's other research to date, the National Broadband Plan will offer recommendations around three core principles. The solutions should be: targeted; collaborative; and local.

Targeted solutions should aim to direct resources at populations less likely to be online with broadband. Collaborative solutions acknowledge the need for government leadership and coordination in this area; but also rely on the private, non-profit and philanthropic sectors. And local solutions understand that, while the decision to adopt is an individual one, the path to adoption is social. It unfolds in homes, libraries, schools, and community organizations in neighborhoods across the country. Local solutions give people an opportunity to learn an unfamiliar technology, in the right environment, and with the right content, technology and teachers that can bring it all together for them. This is what Dr. Nicol Turner Lee from the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies appropriately terms "creating a culture of use."

The staff has come up with a number of recommendations with these goals in mind. To help with cost, the Plan recommends expanding low income Universal Service support to broadband, and exploring using spectrum for a free or very low cost wireless service. Partnerships between the public, private, non-profit and philanthropic sectors, can help address the relevance barrier by encouraging comprehensive solutions that combine hardware, service, training and content, and by conducting outreach and awareness campaigns that target underserved communities. Continuing federal support for state and local broadband initiatives is also essential.

The Plan also highlights a need for a renewed emphasis on program evaluation and measurement, and a National Best Practices Clearinghouse. Despite over 15 years of efforts focused on bridging the digital divide, data of what works best is scarce. We can all take advantage of the current momentum in this area to learn from our investments, and from each other, to inform future policy and programmatic decisions.

There is one recommendation in particular that I would like to highlight today because I think it has tremendous potential. Next week's Plan will recommend a three-part National Digital Literacy Program, designed to give all Americans the skills they need to get and stay on-line. The Program will consist of a National Digital Literacy Corps; a one-

time investment to bolster the capacity of libraries and community centers, and an Online Skills portal for free, basic digital skills training.

The central feature in this program, the proposed National Digital Literacy Corps, is similar to programs like AmeriCorps and SeniorCorps. The Digital Literacy Corps will mobilize hundreds of digital ambassadors in local communities across the country. This is about neighbors helping neighbors get online. The Corps can target vulnerable communities with below-average adoption rates like low-income housing developments, rural towns, Tribal lands, and areas populated primarily by racial and ethnic minorities.

Our country has long recognized the power of education and information, particularly for those who face other disadvantages. Frederick Douglass once said, “Once you learn to read, you will forever be free.” Nothing can open more doors for a person than literacy. But knowing how to read is no longer sufficient to be “literate” in the 21st Century. Basic literacy must be supplemented with digital literacy.

The Commission already has experience in a related program that gives us confidence in its ability to succeed. During the waning months of the DTV transition, the FCC enlisted the help of AmeriCorps to go out into communities across the country to help consumers hook up their converter boxes in order to ensure that they would continue to receive free, over-the-air television following the transition. Young men and women fanned out across the country – from right here in Washington, D.C., to New Orleans, Denver, and Los Angeles. They were welcomed into people’s homes, and helped them get ready for the transition and beyond.

That same spirit can be applied to the longer-term goal of helping our nation’s citizens gain the necessary digital literacy skills to participate fully in all that broadband has to offer. Using people from within the community to help their neighbors can go a long way to ensuring that people are able to use the Internet safely, and to its fullest potential.

Some non-adopters, particularly older Americans and those who are not touched by technology in their communities, may be uncomfortable operating a computer or might be worried that being online exposes them to excessive dangers. Helping those people understand basics about computers and the Internet may be enough to get them online.

A recent study commissioned by the Social Science Research Council highlighted the role of communities in supporting digital literacy. Non-adopters and new users, especially those in low income and minority communities, often rely on the assistance of others to get online or provide one-on-one support. This fact is also why we recognize the need for continuing investment in public access points like libraries and community based organizations.

We have talented young people graduating college committed to doing volunteer work in their communities, who may be unable to find jobs right away. And we have workers laid-off mid-career searching for employment opportunities that require a new set of skills. The Corps can put these people to work building our nation’s digital skills and

building upon its history of grassroots action and community service. Then our country and all of our people will be prepared to compete in the 21st Century global economy. It can help ensure that the online community is an inclusive one.

The principle of inclusion is part of the foundation of our democracy. It is embedded in the statute that created the FCC. And it must be at the heart of the National Broadband Plan.

Together, we can work to ensure that the rich promise of our technological future reaches all Americans, and that all Americans can take advantage of all that broadband has to offer. This is our aim, and this is our responsibility.

Thank you.