

**REMARKS OF
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PARTNERSHIP FOR PROGRESS ON THE DIGITAL DIVIDE
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY
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Good morning, everyone. Thank you, Alex, for the introduction. I'm looking forward to my conversation with Gigi Sohn in just a few minutes.

As you just heard, my name is Geoffrey Starks and I'm the newest Commissioner at the Federal Communications Commission. I've been a Commissioner for a bit more than 100 days now, and I'm thrilled to be here today to share some thoughts with you.

When I was invited to join you today, and learned more about this gathering and its goals, I immediately thought that this would be a perfect opportunity to lay down a marker about what I think is one of the most important issues facing America – and I will say it plain, that is getting the internet everywhere. It is no secret that millions of Americans—over 24 million by the FCC's count—still do not have access to high speed broadband. And millions more don't use high speed broadband at home because they can't afford it. Getting broadband everywhere must be one of our very highest priorities.

I believe that we are transitioning from a “digital divide” into a state of “internet inequality.” Now what do I mean by that? Two points. First, we are rapidly moving to a 5G world that will offer lightning fast speeds—gigabit speeds or more. And I'm all for ushering in fifth generation of wireless technology, but I am deeply concerned about the far too common communities with “no-G.” I am worried about a world where those with much get even more, and everyone else gets left behind. That rings to me of inequality. And second, the Pew Research Center, among others, has described the digital divide as “persistent.” I think that's right. Long standing issues that disproportionately affect certain communities speak to me as issues of equity.

What I'd like to share with you today are a few sketches of the way that I have observed that internet inequality has impacted America: first, it has robbed many of individual dignity; second, it has hamstrung the US economy; and third, it has weakened our democracy.

Individual Dignity

First, individual dignity. The disconnected feel disaffected, and you can understand why. Those on the wrong side of the digital line intuitively see that they are not able to fully participate in the modern world. And, more importantly, they have to go to great lengths to get the access that they need.

So we hear the compelling narrative of the mother who has to take her child to the local McDonald's or the parking lot of the local library after hours to get a Wi-Fi connection so that her child can finish her homework; the farmer who has to drive a great distance to download and upload crop and livestock data to better his farm operations; and folks that have to leave home and head to the top of the hill to download a movie so that they can have movie night.

These Americans—like all of us—want to be in control of their lives, their own paths, and achieve their goals. Day after day, week after week, these Americans are staring their autonomy and agency in the face, and work to keep from getting further behind. They rely on fast food restaurants, community centers, errant Wi-Fi signals – whatever it takes to be able to perform basic tasks that so many take of us for granted. And when they actually get a moment of peace and reflection, they wonder why was it so hard? Why can't I get some help? They feel forgotten. But not by me. Not by us here today.

U.S. Economy

Second, the economic impact of broadband cannot be overstated. I believe that internet inequality is the greatest barrier to our future global competitiveness. I believe that solving this problem, and quickly, will decide whether communities across this country succeed, or they are left to wither and, in some instances, disappear altogether.

Towns without broadband struggle to create or retain businesses and jobs, and few new businesses will move to a town that isn't connected. Without broadband, businesses and entrepreneurs are shut out of markets – local, national, and global. Not only that, but closing the digital divide, and ensuring that broadband is used more consistently by more people, would allow the wide-scale rollout of incredible tools that could save time and money for consumers and businesses alike. For instance, broadband enables cutting-edge telehealth services that can improve the quality of care while cutting costs and helping consumers avoid the inconvenience and expense associated with traveling to a doctor. According to one report, shifting annual patient visits and other common types of appointments to virtual telehealth services could save \$10 billion per year across the healthcare system. Pushing aggressive policies and devoting significant resources to making sure that more people can access and afford broadband would be one of the best investments we can make as a country – and it will ultimately pay for itself.

Democracy

And finally, democracy. I see two significant threats where internet inequality directly impacts our American democracy.

First, is that broadband is required for modern educational and information needs that foster an informed electorate and the robust exchange of ideas. We know all too well that ideas that would disrupt the status quo or voices of dissent have historically been shut out by folks who have power. Not only does internet access allow us to **hear** these ideas and voices, but it allows us to **create** these ideas and **be** these voices. While we know that we need to do more to ensure that our networks and technology can't be used against us to threaten our democracy, we've also seen countless examples of thoughtful new voices and activists that use the internet to make our democracy stronger and that much more democratic. Further, on a more basic level, our children need broadband to be educated and grow into full participants in our democracy – not only to complete assignments at school, but more holistically to master the technology of today so that they can innovate for tomorrow. But high speed broadband also opens the door to countless supplemental and enrichment opportunities for all of us, including adults, such as online degrees and certifications, standardized testing resources, and much more. Those who are disconnected find it harder to access education and information, and are less able to raise their voices and be heard.

And second, when I meet with communities that are on the wrong side of the internet equality line—regardless of whether they are rural or urban, white or black, young or old—I hear the same notes of deep frustration, and yes, anger.

The widening chasm of broadband haves and have-nots threatens central and core notions of our shared culture as Americans. It is pulling us apart when it should, by its very nature, connect us. That is to say, the persistently uneven distribution of who is connected is not healthy for our democracy.

So what would a failure to act here really look like? What is the cost of persistent, or even permanent internet inequality? The answer depends on what kind of country we want. I, personally, want to live in a country where everyone has the opportunity to succeed; where individuals have a strong sense of agency and autonomy; where everyone can participate in our economy – and it is that much stronger because of it; and where all communities can see their unique voices reflected in a healthy democracy. I'm inspired to see so many folks in this room that share my vision for this country and others around the world. I'd encourage all of you to stay focused on this issue, and continue to generate new momentum to shake loose some of this stagnation and move us in the right direction.

I appreciate the opportunity to share my thinking on internet inequality today. I have been thinking about these issues for a long while. But, before I wrap up my remarks, I'd like to briefly touch on one more related issue – a recent example of a new digital divide where our communications networks and technology can be unfairly weaponized against certain segments of our population. Take facial recognition, for example. Right now, certain law enforcement agencies are taking advantage of connectivity to deploy facial recognition systems in police cruisers or at public events. In some countries, these systems are deployed widely over entire cities, passively identifying anyone in a given area. But where do we stand here in America? As a former Department of Justice official, I know that there is almost no greater power that we give to our society than that of the criminal justice system. Often, these new tools are used to decide whether or not a person should be interdicted by law enforcement – a first touch with the criminal justice system and a significant event in anyone's life that, unfortunately, can lead to severe consequences, even for the innocent.

So what's the problem? These systems do a bad job identifying communities of color, and black and brown faces. Last year, the ACLU used facial recognition software to scan the face of every member of Congress against a mugshot database. That test generated 28 false positive matches, implying that these Representatives and Senators—including many from communities of color—were criminals.

San Francisco, one of the most forward-looking cities in technology, just banned the technology. Brad Smith, President of Microsoft, revealed the other day that his company will not sell its facial recognition technology to law enforcement, because, "It will lead to bias. It will lead to false identifications. People will be put in the back of police cars when they've done nothing wrong."

Facial recognition is just one example of an advancement in technology, enabled by our communications networks, that will soon become a bigger part of our lives. There are countless others, like artificial intelligence decision making algorithms, that can have bias built in. If we don't get them right, new digital divides will propagate. We have to get this right. The consequences of getting it wrong are unacceptable.

With that, I'd like to thank you for inviting me to join you this morning for the opening of this important gathering. And I'm looking forward to talking with the incomparable Gigi Sohn. Thank you.