

**REMARKS OF  
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS**

**MMTC CHAMPIONS OF DIGITAL EQUITY  
AND 35th ANNIVERSARY KICKOFF  
DECEMBER 9, 2020**

Good morning. I am honored to join you for this kickoff in recognition of MMTC's thirty-five years of serving as a leading voice for communities of color and other marginalized groups, and working to achieve equity and inclusion in the Tech, Media, and Telecom industries. MMTC has been a strong, passionate voice in the quest for digital equity, collaborating with and convening other important voices to shine a much-needed spotlight on a wide range of social justice issues. This organization fully understands that the fight for justice and equity is a long and steady march. I have been proud to stand shoulder to shoulder with you, and MMTC's success and longevity as an organization is a testament to your commitment to making our highest ideals meet our real world. You all have done much, but there is much more to do.

As noted by the late Congressman John Lewis: "Access to the internet ... is the civil rights issue of the 21<sup>st</sup> century." Digital equity requires connectivity, and we know that our communities have suffered from longstanding connectivity inequities that fall along racial, income, and geographic lines. Remediating those inequities is our shared cause and mission. I have worked tirelessly—alongside many here today in our community, including Majority Whip Clyburn—to bring about change to the structures and policies that have for decades kept us from closing the digital divide.

The pandemic has wrought an unprecedented crisis, turning the digital divide into a monstrous COVID-19 divide. But it has also brought unparalleled opportunity to focus our efforts on fundamental issues of fairness as we rebuild our economy and workforce; advance telemedicine; and educate our learners. Access to broadband is a key part of what needs to be fixed for all to have equal opportunities.

That is why the focus of today's panel discussion is so important and timely. The first installment of MMTC's "AI and Civil Rights" White Paper Series, titled "Big Data: Discrimination and Data-Driven Decision-Making," sets the stage for a meaningful examination of the impact of big data on civil rights and artificial intelligence, and the particular the ways in which data and algorithms can either marginalize, or benefit, communities of color. Black communities are both hyper-visible and invisible; over-included and excluded. We are more likely to be targeted with misinformation or voter suppression tactics, but less likely to be able to fill out the Census online or register to vote or request a mail-in ballot. We are more likely to be wrongly accused of a crime because of faulty facial recognition algorithms and bias that misidentifies our faces, but less likely to be extended credit at reasonable market rates or at all. This significant push and pull in the digital space demands our shared attention and advocacy.

One notable problem is when big data includes "dirty data," [defined](#) as missing or wrong data, non-standard representations of the same data as applicable to different people, as well as

manipulated data derived from or influenced by distorted practices that reflect individual and societal biases. One real world impact of relying on dirty data is that it tends to produce outcomes that reinforce negative stereotypes and presumptions. For example, if an algorithm uses racially skewed arrest statistics to determine that Black neighborhoods have higher instances of crime, that can lead to lower property values, which depresses the ability of Black homeowners to build wealth, which makes them higher credit risks because biases correlate residing in a low-income neighborhood with the ability to pay one's bills. Similar outcome for AI and algorithms used in healthcare—a [study](#) found evidence that racial bias in a particular algorithm reduced the number of Black patients identified for extra care by more than half. These are life-changing events.

Unfortunately, the racial, cultural, and economic biases we see online reflect what we've been dealing with for decades offline. The fact that in some instances today, machines are making the misguided assumptions and decisions masks the problem because there is a presumption that human bias no longer plays a significant role. But we know that could not be farther from the truth; bias will continue to factor into machine-based algorithms that drive AI decision-making so long as algorithms are programmed by humans.

Three closing thoughts on my mind. First, we must continue to demand that those using AI in decision-making improve their ability to identify bias and discrimination, including understanding how both AI design and the data inputs may be the culprits.

Second, we need to ensure that there are proper ground rules for the operation of AI and machine learning and the use of big data to keep all Americans, especially the most marginalized, protected. Consider, for example, facial recognition technology. A 2019 [study](#) conducted by the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Institute of Standards and Technology confirmed the danger of relying too heavily on facial recognition algorithms after finding that many of the algorithms they tested exhibited deeply troubling biases for demographic groups defined by sex, age, and race. Notably, false positives were highest in people of color—Native Americans, and African American and Asian populations.

Third, we must continue to speak up and demand action when we discover instances of AI-related bias and discrimination.

From facial recognition to contact tracing, it is clear that technology and telecommunications are going to continue to play an essential role in this space. These issues and others affecting digital equity will have significant and long-lasting impacts on our nation, especially on communities of color, low-income communities, and rural communities. I look forward to the forthcoming discussion about discrimination and data-driven decision-making, and to the important research and reporting in future white papers to examine the need for digital equity.

Thank you again for including me in this kickoff event, and congratulations to MMTC, a true Champion of Digital Equity, for your thirty-five years of excellence.