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Only Connect

Broadband should bring people together, not drive them apart.

I've been writing about communications, on and off, for about 20 years – since the dawn, or at least the early morning, of the broadband era. During that time, broadband went from being a novelty, to a luxury, to a utility, to something as central to most people's lives as air and water.

BROADBAND COMMUNITIES' mission statement says, "Our editorial aims to accelerate the deployment of fiber to the home (FTTH)," and that's what the magazine and conferences have done since 2004. I believe – as does the rest of the editorial team – that broadband, especially *great* broadband, has the potential to connect people in productive ways.

And not just the potential. Over the years, we've reported many stories about broadband connectivity revitalizing dying towns, about telemedicine improving patient outcomes, about internet in the schools opening children's eyes to the larger world. We've published articles about individuals using broadband to connect to family members and to job opportunities, about businesses using broadband to become more productive and broaden their markets, and about cities using broadband to improve public safety and respond better to citizens.

Deployment of FTTH and other broadband technologies has been strong for the last several years. Private investment in broadband is poised for another banner year, and a political consensus is forming around increased public investment. For the first time,

the end of the digital divide in the United States may be within sight.

THE OTHER DIGITAL DIVIDE

Yet I believe that Americans – even, or especially, those of us who are broadband advocates – need to recognize the emergence of a second digital divide. As the United States becomes more connected, in some ways we have become more divided than ever.

As it turns out, better access to information also means better access to misinformation and even to disinformation. When it's easier to stay in touch with our friends and hear more from those we agree with, it's easier to shut out those who disagree. Social-media algorithms feeding us "more of the same" create echo chambers trapping people in alternate realities, each of which seems to its inhabitants to be the only reality.

Who would have thought, 2,200 years after mathematicians accurately measured the circumference of the Earth, that millions of Americans could be convinced the Earth was flat?

And who would have thought a technology hailed as a platform for civic engagement could bring us dangerously close to the destruction of democracy?

As we think about how to connect more people, we need to consider how to use these connections to form a "more perfect union" rather than to drive ourselves farther apart. ❖

Masha Zager

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