

‘Connecting the Unconnected: Strategies for Ecosystems’

- **A summary of the April 7 Community Conversation**

Watch the recorded version of the webinar here.

View questions, comments, resources and ideas that were offered here.

Never has the digital divide been more glaring, perhaps, than in the recent weeks and months of the COVID-19 outbreak. But, experts at the center of the issue are quick to point out that this inequality is not new.

“Most of these problems were here before COVID-19, and they will continue to be present afterwards,” noted Samantha Schartman-Cyck of the Marconi Society. Experts weighed in on how to reduce this persistent disparity in a panel discussion hosted by the STEM Learning Ecosystems Community of Practice Tuesday, April 7.

When the internet entered daily life 20 to 30 years ago, many of us naturally encountered it—either personally or professionally—and learned to use it over time, sometimes with the help of a colleague, family member, or friend. However, many others in America never had the resources to do so. And today, prohibitive costs (an average of \$50-\$70 a month nationwide), limited access to hardware, and hard-to-reach rural locations continue to leave over 14 million people without internet access in the US.

More than ‘Flipping a Switch’

Vint Cerf, Google’s Chief Internet Evangelist and one of the “Fathers of the Internet,” knows that solving this problem will take far more than “flipping a switch.” It will involve improving data collection methods, examining the economies of access, ensuring appropriate internet speeds, and more.

Lin Wells, of People Centered Internet, acknowledged that the problem-solving process will require an iterative rather than linear approach to be successful.

Extra Funding, National Policies Can Help

The panel agreed that while large, national policies can’t entirely solve the problem, they can’t hurt, either—and neither can the extra funding.

The Digital Equity Act, introduced by U.S. Sen. Patty Murray in 2019, supports digital inclusion through state planning. And states such as Arizona have created “COVID-19 Digital Access Task Forces” to lobby the Federal Communications Commission for increased access at the state level.

At the heart of community engagement must be authenticity. Younger community members, such as those who have attended college and returned to a rural hometown, are great candidates for helping communities see the value of improved internet access, suggested David

Bray of the Atlantic Council.

Meanwhile, organizations like Free Press, Public Knowledge, the American Library Association and others offer reliable sources of internet support to communities.

The Bottom Line?

"Digital inclusion on a community level is *human work*," Bill Callahan of the National Digital Inclusion Alliance stressed. When we take the time to understand individual barriers, cultivate the community voice, and link them with the right opportunities, we can move the needle on digital access. And as we navigate this unprecedented pandemic, we can use it to draw attention to a need that has been here for years. Wells offered some closing encouragement: "Resilience is not bouncing back, but bouncing forwards. How can we end up stronger through this?"