The Digital Divide: How Did We Get Here? How Do We Bridge It?

The Covid pandemic yanked back the curtain on the telecommunication industry’s almost decade-long attempt at building out a world class telecommunication infrastructure. What we saw were millions and millions of kids without high-speed internet at home – literally blocked from attending school – virtually; revealing the true depth of Digital Divide and directly contradicting reports from industry shills who wrote “87% of CA was connected.” Hogwash!

What an embarrassment…for the telecommunication industry. They were given extreme deference via a deregulation regime that was not unlike the deregulation in energy which caused the Enron scandal; or the deregulation in banking causing the 2008 crash. But hey, it was mostly just a bunch of black and brown kids that were affected in this failed telecommunication deregulation regime. So, no big deal, right? After all, the telecommunication industry has a fiduciary duty to its shareholders to maximize profits. The fact that millions of kids were blocked from participating in distance learning were acceptable consequences of the greater goal – profits!

In 2012, then State Senator Alex Padilla introduced SB1161, which sailed through the legislature at break-neck speed and was subsequently codified into Public Utilities Code 710 (PU 710). PU 710 codified the co-mingling of wired and wireless lines of businesses, stripping out all financial incentives to build out a world class telecommunication infrastructure (according to a CPUC Network Exam report published in 2019); and most literally stopping dead-in-its-tracks – fiber to and through the premises (FTTP) build-out. Instead, financial incentives for the telecommunication industry to digitally red-line black and brown communities was squarely purposed into law. A racism of the digital-kind, exacerbating the digital divide.

Fast-forward to today and we find the arrogance of the telecommunication industry brazenly offensive. They are saying, “We can fix this digital divide problem with more deregulation and less oversight, vis-à-vis SB556 and AB537. They cannot be trusted to close the digital divide, and commitment to build out a world class telecommunication infrastructure is suspect, given their plans to deploy third rate technology known as 5G. Admittedly, 5G is 100X faster than 4G, but it is 10,000X (ten thousand times) slower than FTTP.

The biggest problem is not the telecommunications industry. The biggest problem is our California legislators have been bamboozled into thinking third rate technology will somehow get us to a world class telecommunications infrastructure, magically resolving the digital divide. Many Senators and Assembly members are saying, “let’s just let them do this (SB556 and AB537), and we’ll figure out the details later.” Dear Senators and Assembly members, that cake has already been baked. Trust in the telecommunications industry is the central reason why millions of kids’ lives were turned
upside-down, *educationally-speaking*.

The Governor’s $7B commitment to building a world class telecommunications infrastructure is an excellent plan, but is at risk of being derailed by these bamboozle bills (SB556 and AB537). Unfortunately, Verizon, AT&T, T-Mobile and Comcast (Xfinity), etc., will ask the non-profits they fund to testify on their behalf; providing non-profit leaders and elected officials with scripted lines on how important it is to support these bamboozle bills. Brothers and sisters, before you take that microphone on behalf of the industry – consider the following.

To be clear: We are either building a world class telecommunications infrastructure, or we are not. If we are, we need look no further than the 27 developed countries who are ahead of us on fiber deployment according to an [OECD 2020 report](#) – where FTTP is a mandate, not an option. The short-comings with 5G are as follows: 1) cannot penetrate doors or walls, 2) slower than cable TV, 3) 10,000 times slower than fiber optics, 4) Radio Frequency (RF) waves used by 5G are cancer causing, say federally funded studies, 5) unregulated and unaffordable, 6) will obliterate personal privacy, and the most outrageous is, 7) there are no plans to deploy 5G in low-income neighborhoods. This leaves families in the digital divide today, right where they are – without FTTP Internet at home.

We encourage CA legislators to address the digital divide at its source. Separate wired from wireless lines of business. Make the telecommunications industry deliver on everything landline (wired) customers paid for on network upgrades. Now that PU 710 has sunset, it is time to embrace the Governor’s vision of building out a world class telecommunications infrastructure, moving California and the US out of that number 28 spot in fiber deployment. FTTP is the only way we can truly close the digital divide. *Let’s not get it twisted.*