Will the next U.S. president close the digital divide for Americans without broadband access?

March 3 2016, by J.j. Po-An Hsieh

If they build it, will you come? Credit: Doc Searls, CC BY

Most of the 2016 presidential candidates' policy platforms recognize the strategic importance of high-speed Internet (HSI), or broadband, in transforming the economy and spurring innovation.

The candidates appear motivated by a shared belief that high-speed Internet and HSI-enabled digital innovations – such as Uber, AirBnB,

Amazon, Facebook, Google and so on – are driving economic growth and transforming society. The question then becomes what should be done to further unleash HSI's potential economic and societal benefits.
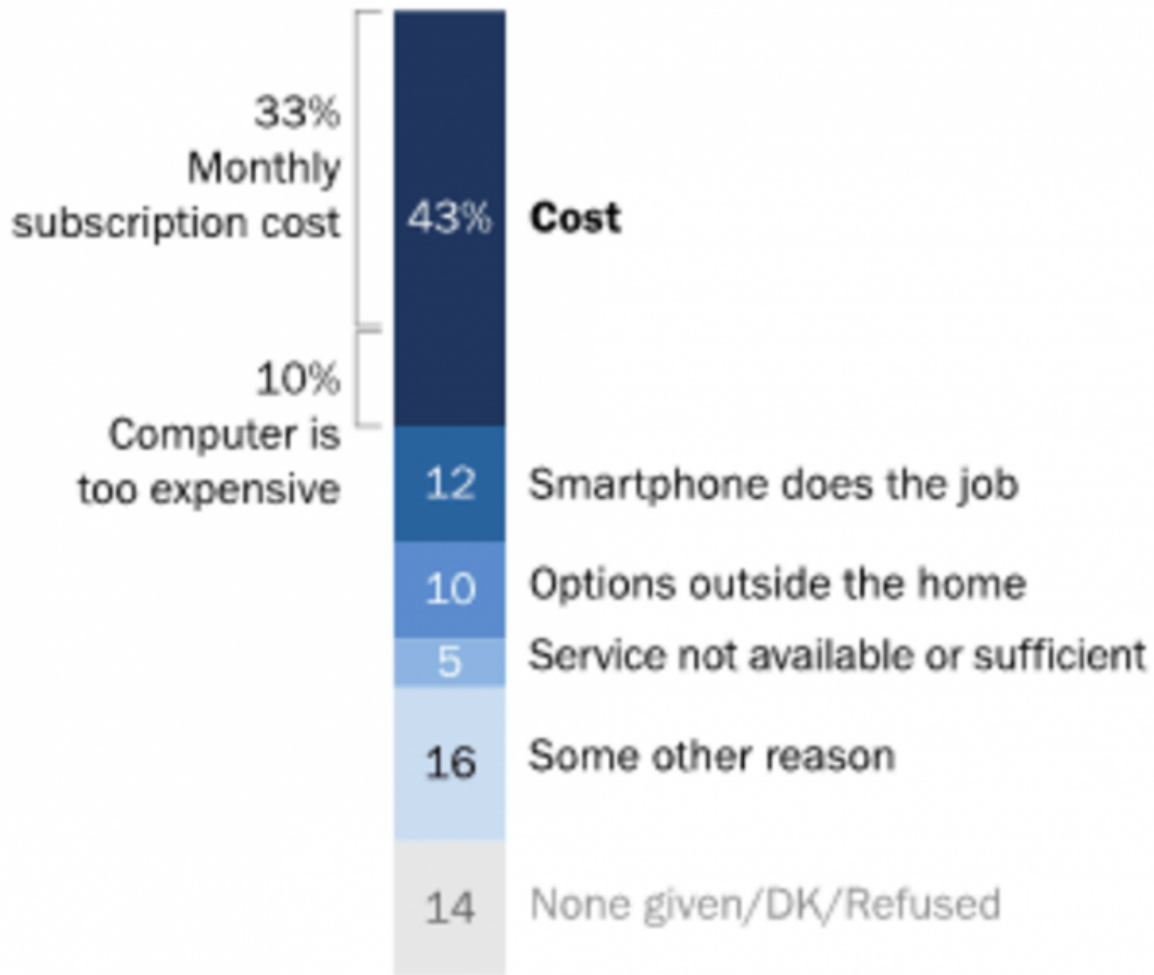
The candidates approach Internet issues from different perspectives, dividing along party lines. Suggestions by Republicans Cruz and Rubio about minimizing Internet-related taxes and enhancing cybersecurity are indeed important. But these policy platforms are more relevant to the so-called Internet Haves than to the Internet Have-nots who aren't online.

Only Democrats Clinton's and Sanders' stated policies aim to address the fundamental issue of the digital divide – the gap between those with digital technologies and access to high-speed Internet versus those without.

However, is what Clinton and Sanders endorse enough to get all Americans hooked up to blazing fast broadband and all it enables?

Cost is the major reason most people do not have broadband connections

% of non-broadband users who cite the following as their most important reason for not having broadband service

33%
Monthly
subscription cost

43% **Cost**

10%
Computer is
too expensive

12 Smartphone does the job

10 Options outside the home

5 Service not available or sufficient

16 Some other reason

14 None given/DK/Refused

Source: Survey conducted June 10-July 12, 2015. Sample size = 2,001

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Current state of Internet access in the US

According to the Pew Research Center, the home broadband adoption rate in the U.S. [dropped from 70 percent to 67 percent from 2012 to 2015](#).

Cost is a big factor for those who aren't connected. At the same time, the majority of Americans indicated that having home broadband access (rather than mobile Internet) is critical for many important life activities, including job hunting, access to health information or government services and so on.

Some families do rely on mobile phones as an alternative to HSI, mostly because of its greater affordability. But mobile service providers impose a data cap. And smartphones have limited capabilities compared to regular desktops or laptops, so mobile access isn't a perfect substitute.

Those who do not have [home broadband](#) or who rely on mobile Internet as their sole HSI access are usually [socioeconomically disadvantaged](#) (e.g., lower income, education), racial or ethnic minorities, and/or rural residents.

[Research suggests lack of HSI limits](#) education opportunities, career development and social mobility.

Platform plans

Both Democrats aim to address the digital divide by offering broadband access to those who currently lack it.

[Sanders' platform asserts](#) that HSI is "no longer a luxury" and he casts the digital divide as a rural infrastructure issue. By missing out on high-speed broadband access, rural residents aren't able to use it for "21st century commerce, education, telemedicine and public safety." Sanders' Rebuild America Act

would invest US$25 billion over five years to expand high-speed broadband networks in underserved and unserved areas, and would boost speeds and capacity all across the country, particularly in rural areas.

Sanders' website doesn't mention how he'd hope to finance this expansion.

	2013		2015		
	Broadband at home	Unweighted number of cases	Broadband at home	Unweighted number of cases	Change (percentage points)
All					
	70%	6,010	67%	6,687	-3
Gender					
Male	70%	2,733	66%	3,367	-4
Female	70%	3,277	67%	3,320	-3
Parents					
Parents	77%	1,533	73%	1,678	-4
Non-parents	67%	4,449	64%	4,976	-3
Race/Ethnicity					
White	74%	4,223	72%	4,536	-2
African American	62%	664	54%	741	-8
Hispanic	56%	682	50%	888	-6
Age					
18-29	81%	945	75%	1,118	-6
30-49	77%	1,590	74%	1,830	-3
50-64	68%	1,842	65%	1,928	-3
65+*	47%	1,526	45%	1,688	-2
Income					
Under $20K	46%	1,048	41%	1,221	-5
$20K to $50K	67%	1,664	63%	1,752	-4
$50 to $75K	85%	787	80%	868	-5
$75K to $100K	88%	634	88%	688	0
Over $100K*	93%	1,010	91%	1,222	-2
Education					
High school grads or less	50%	2,121	47%	2,219	-3
Some college /associate degree	80%	1,627	75%	1,718	-5
College +	90%	2,225	87%	2,704	-3
Geography					
Rural	60%	1,180	55%	1,247	-5
Urban*	70%	1,850	67%	2,167	-3
Suburban	74%	2,980	70%	3,273	-4

Note: * signifies that 2013-2015 differences are **not** statistically significant

Clinton's platform, too, stresses that HSI is "a necessity for equal

opportunity and social mobility in a 21st-century economy."

Part of her infrastructure plan calls for connecting "all Americans to the digital economy."

She will finish the job of connecting America's households to the Internet with a commitment that by 2020, 100 percent of households in America will have access to affordable broadband. She will also invest new resources in bringing free Wi-Fi to public buildings and public transportation.

Clinton says she will "harness both public and private capital" to make it all happen.

These free or affordable broadband access plans seem reasonable. But a critical question remains: will the digital divide be resolved simply by offering high-speed Internet access at low or even no cost to the have-nots?

My research suggests the answer is "maybe not."

More to it than just hooking up

The results of [numerous initiatives](#) that [aimed to address the digital divide](#) collectively suggest the digital divide is a multifaceted problem.

Take, for instance, the case of the LaGrange Free High-Speed Internet Initiative in Georgia. Even when the city made free high-speed Internet access available to everyone, only about [40 percent of the 10,000 eligible households signed up](#). One cannot help but ask: it's already free, why don't you adopt it?

It turns out that for digital have-nots, the challenges go well beyond just

the financial and material barriers. The disadvantaged may also need motivation, knowledge, skills and even confidence in order to use digital technologies. They also need social support that provides the needed assistance and encouragement so as to hop on the Internet. And they may not have opportunities for meaningful use of the high-speed Internet.

To help the disadvantaged cross the divide requires an orchestrated effort coordinating the various necessary resources – financial, technical, educational and social supports.

But once someone is online, it can be life-changing. Here's how one physician described a patient from LaGrange:

She was financially strapped, didn't have any income. She was using this and actually for her, it brought her out of depression. Because she was very depressed, and she was able to make human contact with people all around the world. And she had friends she would correspond with in India and other countries.

Even when the digital divide is bridged for some have-nots, we still find inequality in the way people use the Internet. This difference in usage behaviors between the socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged is called digital inequality or the second-level digital divide.

In particular, my colleagues and I found that the advantaged are much more productive in using broadband to attain educational, economic, health, financial, social and political benefits.

In other words, access to high-speed Internet may wind up reproducing and enhancing existing advantages.

The process is ongoing

[Municipal governments launch initiatives](#) to [offer public broadband service](#) with an eye toward multiple benefits: developing a digital labor force, attracting new investment, bridging the digital divide, and harnessing opportunities for digital innovations.

But other stakeholders aren't as excited. For instance, [incumbent service providers typically criticize](#) these free initiatives as compromising their interests by offering competing service.

Some lawmakers (e.g., [Cruz](#) and [Rubio](#)) oppose such initiatives on the grounds government shouldn't intervene with market mechanisms.

Even if a Clinton or Sanders administration is able to structure a deal that potentially serves the interests of different stakeholders – government, incumbent service providers, the digitally advantaged and disadvantaged – these initiatives typically encounter [financial constraints that endanger their continuation](#). Any future economic downturn could also challenge the economic sustainability of such deals.

Successfully bridging the digital divide is complicated. Besides providing the financial resources and technological means, an effective plan would need to motivate and encourage the have-nots, develop their digital competencies, and provide technical and social support.

After connecting the disadvantaged to HSI, policymakers should be aware of the second digital divide – rooted in ongoing socioeconomic inequalities – and provide continuous training and community support.

Finally, a successful plan would likely structure deals that serve different stakeholders' interests and are designed to sustain the initiatives.

This story is published courtesy of [The Conversation](#) *(under Creative Commons-Attribution/No derivatives).*