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Internet is Essential: How COVID-19 Exacerbated Baltimore's Digital Divide

August 3rd, 2020, during the onset of Tropical Storm Isaias, a rally of poncho-ed and umbrella-ed students, teachers, and parents stood outside of the Comcast regional headquarters in South Baltimore and held signs like, "It's 2020!! Internet is a RIGHT," "No Internet, No Education," and "Math lesson: Profiting off of COVID + Holding City Schools Hostage = #ComcastCares (Spoiler, they don't :))."¹ At the start of the pandemic, the company, which operates as the de-facto broadband monopoly in the city,² began offering its \$9.95/month "Internet Essentials" plan at zero cost to low-income families and those who qualify for other subsidized services for 60 days.³ But what at first appeared as a God-send to the district - Public Schools Commissioner Vernon A. Reid, Jr. described how nearly half of all students disappeared from classes in March due to a lack of home Internet⁴ - was quickly found by the Baltimore Teachers Union (BTU) to be largely inept for online classes. With 25Mbps download speeds/3Mbps upload speeds, the plan was just barely meeting the Federal Communications Commission (FCC)'s current definition of broadband.⁵ Franca Muller Paz, a Spanish teacher at

¹ Daniel Oyefusi, "Baltimore teachers, students and parents rally to demand Comcast expand its free internet service as virtual learning continues," *Baltimore Sun*, August 3, 2021, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/education/bs-md-protest-baltimore-comcast-internet-access-student-teachers-20200804-t44ukxhflbhgjkif72ih4hkjy-story.html>.

² Ian Round, "Four students who can only access the internet through one shared hotspot," *Baltimore Brew*, May 11, 2021, <https://baltimorebrew.com/2020/05/11/four-students-sharing-one-chromebook-that-they-can-only-access-through-a-hotspot/>.

³ Oyefusi, "Baltimore teachers, students and parents rally."

⁴ Ian Round, "City Schools purchases 12,000 Chromebooks and 14,000 chargers," *Baltimore Brew*, April 30, 2020, <https://www.baltimorebrew.com/2020/04/30/city-schools-purchases-12000-chromebooks-and-14000-chargers/>.

⁵ Alex Trollip, "Understanding the Urban Digital Divide," *Bipartisan Policy Center*, March 5, 2021, <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/blog/urban-broadband-blog/>.

Baltimore City College public school and the faculty adviser of SOMOS (along with BTU, the other organizer of the rally), told the *Baltimore Brew*, “It’s not a solution. It’s not nearly sufficient for what the needs are... There are students who would never ever even dream of missing a day of school, and now I haven’t heard from them for weeks.”⁶

This all occurred as Comcast continued to profit enormously throughout the year, posting a fourth-quarter gain of 11 million subscribers to its new Peacock streaming service, along with an additional 538,000 high-speed Internet customers.⁷ And, in January 2021, the company announced a data cap on all non-unlimited plans (including Internet Essentials) - customers would be charged \$10 for every 50 gigabytes they used beyond a 1.2 terabyte threshold, with a max surcharge of \$100.⁸ In response, City Council members Zeke Cohen (a former educator), with Kristerfer Burnett and Ryan Dorsey, announced at a news conference that “We are tired of predatory providers like Comcast holding Black and brown children’s education for ransom during a pandemic,” and that with the Baltimore Digital Equity Coalition, they were requesting a price gouging investigation from the Maryland Attorney General.⁹ In February then, the Council, together with continued organizing from BTU and SOMOS, successfully exhorted Comcast to both postpone the cap policy change, and to increase the Internet Essentials package speeds up to 50MBps/5MBps - almost a year after the pandemic started.¹⁰

⁶ Round, “Four students.”

⁷ *Baltimore Sun* Editorial Board, “Here’s how Comcast could be a better community partner in Baltimore | COMMENTARY,” *Baltimore Sun*, February 3, 2021, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/opinion/editorial/bs-ed-comcast-good-neighbor-20210203-l62wn64szrc4hews4sisq n7ea-story.html>.

⁸ McKenna Oxenden, “Xfinity data cap that would affect Marylanders is postponed by Comcast until 2022,” *Baltimore Sun*, February 23, 2021, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/business/bs-bz-data-cap-postponed-comcast-20210223-zjbgwuc5i5hpvoezumynmyg kda-story.html#nt=interstitial-manual>.

⁹ Emily Opilo, “Baltimore City Council members urge FCC to strengthen regulation of internet service providers to improve students’ access,” *Baltimore Sun*, March 16, 2021, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/politics/bs-md-pol-baltimore-council-letter-fcc-20210316-taq2za7zpvdexfxnsj3rmyg 4ya-story.html#nt=interstitial-manual>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

This struggle between Comcast and the residents of Baltimore underscores something the late Civil Rights leader and U.S. Representative John Lewis said: “Access to the Internet ... is the civil rights issue of the 21st century.”¹¹ But, the ‘digital divide’ is not traditionally viewed as such - rather, at the federal and state level, it’s often framed as a rural problem. In 2019, the FCC’s Rural Digital Opportunity Fund began investing \$20.4 billion to connect 4 million homes and small businesses in rural areas,¹² and in 2017, Maryland governor Larry Hogan created the Office of Rural Broadband, which works with local governments and private companies to offer grants and offset costs of infrastructure.¹³ And for good reason - 324,000 rural Marylanders still lack access to broadband because their geography increases the cost to build a network, and their lower densities means fewer potential subscribers.¹⁴ The divide here regards availability, but for urban families, the divide regards one of accessibility. Within Baltimore, even though the infrastructure is deployed, 96,000 households - that’s 40.7% of the city - lack broadband.¹⁵ Fast and reliable internet access, now classified as a human right by the United Nations,¹⁶ is increasingly becoming recognized during the COVID-era as part of the social safety net because of its critical role in facilitating work, learning, and access to health care and government services. The Benton Institute for Broadband & Society provides the following example in their *Broadband for America Now* report:

¹¹ Jonathon Sallet, *Broadband for America Now* (Evanston, IL: Benton Institute for Broadband & Society, October 2020), https://www.benton.org/sites/default/files/BroadbandAmericaNow_final.pdf.

¹² John B. Horrigan, “Analysis: Digital Divide Isn’t Just a Rural Problem,” *The Daily Yonder*, August 14, 2019, <https://dailyyonder.com/analysis-digital-divide-isnt-just-a-rural-problem/2019/08/14/>

¹³ Alison Knezevich, Lillian Reed and Wilborn P. Nobles III, “In 2020, many Marylanders still lack high-speed internet. And that’s a problem for work and school.,” *Baltimore Sun*, August 7, 2020, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/coronavirus/bs-md-pandemic-broadband-access-20200807-6ugb7j7dkneyvntm7dyvjgydmm-story.html>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ John B. Horrigan, *Baltimore’s Digital Divide: Gaps in Internet Connectivity and the Impact on Low-Income City Residents* (Baltimore, MD: The Abell Foundation, May 2020), [https://abell.org/sites/default/files/files/2020_Abell_digital%20divide_full%20report_FINAL_web%20\(dr\).pdf](https://abell.org/sites/default/files/files/2020_Abell_digital%20divide_full%20report_FINAL_web%20(dr).pdf)

¹⁶ Talia Ralph, “UN deems Internet access a basic human right,” *The World*, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2012-07-07/un-deems-internet-access-basic-human-right>.

“Consider the difficulties low-income households in Baltimore have faced in applying for federal heating assistance. With in-person intake sites closed, households must apply online or with paper applications. But many households do not have ready access to the internet or the digital skills to upload documentation and navigate the online energy assistance process.”¹⁷

At the onset of the pandemic, the Abell Foundation released its report, *Baltimore's Digital Divide: Gaps in Internet Connectivity and the Impact on Low-income City Residents*, highlighting the city's economic and racial discrepancies in broadband access: only one-third of homes with an annual income lower than \$25,000 have wireline; overall, only 50.2% of Black households and 46.4% of Hispanic households have access. These percentages are significantly higher for wealthier, White residents of the city, and the pattern persists likewise for home computer ownership.¹⁸ Income inequality certainly plays a significant factor - broadband prices have consistently risen over time, especially as the market consolidates - but even at equivalent income brackets, adoption by Black and Hispanic residents still lags behind White counterparts because other hidden systemic barriers exist.¹⁹ Many Internet Service Providers (ISPs) use credit checks, a discriminatory measure in the aftermath of a repeated history of targeted, predatory loans damaging minority credit scores.²⁰ And undocumented families are often reluctant to share the personal information necessary to meet Comcast's eligibility requirements.²¹ As such, the National Digital Inclusion Alliance ranks Baltimore the 42nd worst connected city in America,²² and the Abell Foundation found that of 33 peer cities, Baltimore ranked 29th in broadband adoption since 2016.²³

¹⁷ Sallet, *Broadband*.

¹⁸ Horrigan, *Baltimore's Digital Divide*.

¹⁹ Dana Floberg, “The Racial Digital Divide Persists,” *Free Press*, December 13, 2018, <https://www.freepress.net/our-response/expert-analysis/insights-opinions/racial-digital-divide-persists>.

²⁰ Sarah Ludwig, “Credit scores in America perpetuate racial injustice. Here's how,” *The Guardian*, October 13, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/oct/13/your-credit-score-is-racist-heres-why>.

²¹ Round, “Four students.”

²² “Worst Connected Cities 2019,” *NDIA*, 2019, <https://www.digitalinclusion.org/worst-connected-cities-2019/>.

²³ Horrigan, *Baltimore's Digital Divide*.

But it wasn't until the pandemic shut down schools that these numbers were truly made a focusing event. Fall semester schooling data shows that failing grades have doubled, and sometimes even tripled, state-wide, and in Baltimore specifically, 61% of middle- and high-school students had failed at least one class.²⁴ But while most students experienced some sort of academic loss this year, statistics show that the youth who were struggling before the pandemic are now the ones suffering the worst failures: two-thirds of homeless freshmen will not pass this year; the average daily attendance for low-income students was 56%, compared to a county-wide 80%,²⁵ and; while White students fell behind an average of one to three months of learning, students of color were behind three to five months.²⁶ The pandemic's full effects on learning will remain unknown for some time, but research has found that learning losses tend to compound over time. One study following the aftermath of a 2005 earthquake in Pakistan reports that while affected schools were only closed for 14 weeks, students on average fell behind 1.5 years in schooling compared to unaffected peers - those furthest from opportunity lost the most, but those with educated parents were able to close the gap.²⁷ Citing this study in the hopes to stymie disparities between students, the Abell Foundation in March 2021 called upon the City Council to direct future federal funding towards one-on-one or small group tutoring for students in order to help alleviate learning disruptions.²⁸

²⁴ Liz Bowie, "The big cost of learning online: The number of Maryland students who are failing has soared during the pandemic," *Baltimore Sun*, April 22, 2021, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/education/bs-prem-ed-grades-failing-double-20210422-bgncuh2glna6perfw6y4ya22su-story.html>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Emma Dorn, et al., "COVID-19 and learning loss—disparities grow and students need help," *McKinsey & Company*, December 8, 2021, <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-learning-loss-disparities-grow-and-students-need-help#>.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Liz Bowie, "Baltimore schools should expand tutoring to compensate for COVID disruptions, Abell Foundation says," *Baltimore Sun*, March 30, 2021, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/education/bs-md-tutoring-reading-abell-20210330-xck7xq5bfjfbokal23fbs6ace-story.html>.

The city's response to date has been less lofty, focusing foremost on getting equipment into the hands of students who need it. The public schools system in April 2020 purchased and distributed an additional 12,000 Chromebooks and power cords to accompany the 13,000 pairs already in use.²⁹ All 19 Baltimore County Public Library branches and all 28 park locations have been equipped with high-speed external Wi-Fi, and libraries now also carry an additional 200 wireless hotspots and 300 Chromebooks for rental. The Baltimore County Council has set aside a portion of its CARES Act funding to sponsor six months of free internet to the 11,000 households currently on the Comcast 'Internet Essentials' plan.³⁰ Current Mayor Brandon Scott, highlighting his priority to close the digital divide in both his inaugural and State of the City speeches, recently announced the city's first-ever director of broadband and digital equity.³¹ But, much of the movement's muscle belongs to the Baltimore Digital Equity Coalition, comprised of over 80 local organizations focused on bridging the city's divide. Since March 2020, they have successfully advocated for a \$3 million ordinance on digital equity for schools to purchase devices and expand connectivity, have created a tech support hotline for the city, and have organized a community-wide network stream to collect, refurbish, and distribute thousands of computers to families in need.³²

Still more broadly, even during the midst of the pandemic and a heightened awareness over digital inequity, the city continues its attempt to rebrand itself as the East Coast's Silicon Valley. Kevin Plank, founder of the Baltimore-based Under Armour, wants to renovate the

²⁹ Round, "City Schools purchases."

³⁰ "Olszewski Continues To Take Steps To Address Digital Divide," *Baltimore County Government*, December 21, 2020, <https://www.baltimorecountymd.gov/county-news/2020/12/21/olszewski-continues-to-take-steps-to-address-digital-divide>.

³¹ *Baltimore Sun* Editorial Board, "Baltimore's big opportunity to reverse digital redlining | COMMENTARY," *Baltimore Sun*, April 2, 2021, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/opinion/editorial/bs-ed-0404-ecr-broadband-maryland-20210402-4v4ozd7q2vaohgyfj2pfba6kle-story.html>.

³² "Baltimore Digital Equity Coalition," *Baltimore Digital Equity Coalition*, <https://digitalequitybaltimore.org/>.

blighted South Baltimore section of Port Covington into ‘Cyber Town USA.’ The location is intentional, as Baltimore is a relatively inexpensive city, and they plan on weaning off the high concentration of public cybersecurity specialists located in Washington D.C. to employ their private tech companies.³³ Much like the other Silicon Valley, the makings for this promising future and urban revitalization are currently relegated only for the economic elite, shutting out the significant population on the other side of the divide - or, those who could stand to gain the most from well-paying tech jobs. Currently about 12%, or 35,000, jobs in Baltimore look for candidates with coding skills, a sector which would only grow with Cyber Town USA, and their average salary is already \$94,000.³⁴ A bright horizon is available if Baltimore can build the unprecedented first great ‘EquiTech’ city - fortunately, people are already working on it.

Companies like UpSurge are seeking out and supporting diverse start-ups focused on using technology to improve equity.³⁵ And various equitable digital learning centers located throughout the ‘Black Butterfly’ of the city, like the Digital Harbor Foundation, the Tech Center, Fearless, and Dent Education are all programs dedicated to exposing underprivileged youth to the STEM field through coding, technology, and digital fabrication.³⁶ Rajan Patel, CEO of Dent Education, says of the effort that “steering people into STEM will help the industry in two ways. First, as

³³ Aaron Gregg, “Why a Silicon Valley venture fund thinks Baltimore can be an East Coast tech hub,” *Washington Post*, October 18, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2018/10/18/why-silicon-valley-venture-fund-thinks-baltimore-can-be-an-east-coast-tech-hub/>.

³⁴ Yvonne Wenger, “Movement aims to make Baltimore the 'city that codes' — and it's starting young,” *Baltimore Sun*, November 9, 2018, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/education/bs-md-baltimore-digital-coders-20181026-story.html#nt=interstitial-manual>.

³⁵ Hallie Miller, “New Baltimore-based organization aims to shape city into nation’s first ‘Equitech’ city,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 22, 2021, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/business/bs-bz-upsurge-accelerator-equitech-city-20210422-ftbb62krufabpjsilev6f7swd4-story.html>.

³⁶ Billy Jean Louis, “Baltimore software company leader helps kids learn about technology and following their passions,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 5, 2021, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/features/newsmaker/bs-fe-newsmaker-john-foster-20210405-vmxc2b2hlvhudgfp4a3zrhvie-story.html>.

society solves the digital divide, there will be more representation, and with more representation, minorities in leadership roles can advocate for neighborhoods lacking access to technology.”³⁷ A regenerative economy will help create digital equity - and vice versa. In the 21st century, Internet is essential.

³⁷ Ibid.