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Starks Looks for Digital Solutions in Challenging Times

The ongoing coronavirus pandemic and the increased focus on racial justice issues in recent months have prompted FCC Commissioner Geoffrey Starks to look at issues such as Internet inequality, education, telehealth, and telework, among others, “through a different lens,” he said during an online discussion today with USTelecom President and Chief Executive Officer Jonathan Spalter.

“The issues of who has and who has not on a myriad of issues — talking about jobs, talking about public health, talking about where folks live — there are a lot of issues of equity that are in play right now, that are being focused [on] right now,” he said. “It is time, past time, that those areas are focused on. But, in particular, on the issue of the Internet.”

The racial equality and social justice conversations going on in the country now reflect the fear and frustration among many people of color, as well as hope, Mr. Starks said.

“I do believe that we are in the midst of not just a moment, but a movement,” he said.

While many of those issues will take a long time to remedy, Internet equality is something that can be changed more quickly and needs to be “focused [on] right now,” Mr. Starks said.

Many people of color do not have the same ability to access Internet services, because of availability or affordability, as white Americans, he said.

“There’s a moral component to the fact that we have so many Americans that are still getting left behind,” he said, adding: “Folks are talking about gigabit speed. Folks are talking about 5G. And I’m all for all of those. But there are millions of Americans who are still being left behind. So we need to focus on those issues, as well. There really is inequality for those Americans who are not able to access this transformative technology right now.”

In addition to being concerned about the lack of high-speed broadband in rural areas, Mr. Starks said he is particularly focused on addressing the issue of Americans in urban areas being able to afford Internet service.

“There are millions of Americans, and it’s increasing now given the unemployment numbers that we’re seeing, who simply cannot afford the Internet,” he said, citing statistics saying that number amounts to 18 million people.

In addition, there are many senior citizens who in the past were not concerned about being connected to the Internet, but because of the pandemic could now be helped by having access to it, Mr. Starks said.

“I think now that perspective has been changed and you see so many millions of seniors who are in isolation, unfortunately, and are going to need to be able to connect digitally,” he said, adding: “It is past time for us to make sure that all Americans are connected. The pandemic has really made clear the disparate impact for folks who have and have not.”

How to remedy Internet access-related issues has become even more complicated because of the pandemic, he said.

“It is very difficult to stand up, to prop up brand new programs [now],” he said. “I am deeply aware that creating a brand new program is going to be difficult right now. In some sense, just as a pragmatic way of effectively and efficiently getting benefits out to Americans, getting solutions embedded and out into communities, I think it makes some good sense to rely on the current programs that we have.”

The E-rate program “needs to meet the moment” to help students be able to learn at home, he said, adding that the Lifeline program can also be used to help Americans be able to afford Internet access, Mr. Starks said.

The FCC also should enter into memorandums of understanding with agencies that oversee programs such as Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program to “make sure that Lifeline is better able to reach Americans struggling right now.”

Congress also needs to explore legislative options that will help millions of Americans obtain Internet access for \$10 to \$12 per month, he said.

While companies have stepped up during the pandemic to offer discounted service, Mr. Starks said he is “pragmatic enough to realize companies cannot afford to take on these issues by themselves. So Congress is going to have to play a role there. It’s going to have to make some decisions about how we’re going to continue to keep Americans connected, even those Americans who can’t afford to pay their bill.”

Including funding for broadband service should be part of any further coronavirus-related relief legislation Congress passes, he added.

In the long-term, Mr. Starks said, “Dealing with infrastructure so that we stomp out, once and for all, connectivity issues so that all Americans get the connections that they need is going to be an important part.”

In addition, he said, the FCC must do a better job of determining who has access to the Internet.

“The fact of the matter is that we don’t have great data here at the FCC ... I think it is unacceptable policy making for us not to have a better sense of where Internet is and where it isn’t,” Mr. Starks said. “Actually figuring out where Americans do have connectivity and where they don’t is absolutely something we’re going to have to be better on.”

There also needs to be a focus on ensuring that students have access to wireline broadband services to ensure they have access to robust Internet speeds that enable them to complete their studies, he said.

With the nature of the workforce changing even before the pandemic, digital education will play an important role in ensuring Americans are prepared for the future, in particular women and people of color, he said.

“We need to make sure we are nimble in helping them get trained into what are the jobs [that will be available],” Mr. Starks said. “The tech-telecom space is going to be extremely important in this future.”

Mr. Starks also highlighted a program he launched last month to recognize and commend entities and individuals for their actions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic that have helped make “quality affordable broadband service” available to unserved or underserved communities (TR Daily, June 8).

Applications for the Digital Opportunity Equity Recognition (DOER) Program are due tomorrow, he noted.

Whether the applicants are companies, individuals, or organizations, “I want to be able to tell those stories,” Mr. Starks said.

Mr. Starks said he has not determined yet how many recipients he will recognize as part of the program.
—Jeff Williams

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