

Wireless Industry Proposes ‘Separate but Equal,’ Digital Segregation

June 17, 2022

By: Larry Ortega

For the first time, and maybe the last time, in our generation - money to upgrade our local telecommunication infrastructure is here. Billions and billions of dollars dedicated to do what the telecommunication corporations were paid to do, but never did. This *conspiracy-like* transaction committed over, over and over again in a 25-year window created what is now known as the digital divide: *people across the US who are precluded from accessing key resources over the Internet due to lack of a fiber optic connection to their home.* On May 13, 2022 the President's National Telecommunications and Information Agency (an agency within the Commerce Department) released its [Notice of Funding Opportunity](#) (NOFO) for [grants to all 50 states.](#)

Right on cue the wireless industry has rode in on their white horse to save the day ([SB-717](#)), offering to help close the digital divide – that they themselves created. 1984's George Orwell could not have written it better...this double-speak of the digital kind. The first greatest irony of the century is the telecom industry crying foul: **“how dare these poor communities not have wireless connectivity to the Internet.”** Saying, “we must close the digital divide swiftly and cost effectively,” code for an ask of further extreme deference, i.e. permission to skirt laws designed to keep people safe from harm. The capstone of this first great irony of the century is Verizon's Mr. Rudy Reyes' testimony during a CA state senate hearing in 2021, exclaiming: **“municipalities** are exacerbating the digital divide” by way of enforcing codes and laws meant to keep the public safe from harm. Pure genius. Of all the harm the pandemic caused, it allowed the curtain to be pulled back on the decades of lies the telecommunication industry had been feeding our legislators, their regulators and the general public; and now in the greatest irony (heist) of the century they claim they can fix this. Hah!

The California Public Utilities Commission's (CPUC's) California Advanced Services Fund is the designated administrator of these billions and billions of dollars to flow-in from the Biden Administration. A key industry insert in the vernacular for project funding through the CPUC is **Technology Neutral**. Protocols for technology neutrality erroneously classify wireless and fiber-optics as being the same. They are not. Wireless is the canoe and fiber-optics is the gigantic cruise ship, wherein the cruise ship is the type and class of infrastructure that is [standard around the world for 27 other countries](#) that are currently *whopping the pants* off of the US in fiber deployment. **Technology Neutral** is code for “we still gotta be allowed to give low-income families the breadcrumb service.”

Many of us who attend important statewide meetings in California, have to painfully endure other participant's use of a narrative that aligns closely to the first greatest irony of the century, stating: **“to address the digital divide swiftly and sustainably [we must] deploy community wireless networks.”** Knowing what we now [know about wireless v. fiber deployment](#), we must recapture the narrative, and make it about people, and the quality of service people should have in order to access key on-line resources, e.g. jobs, training, attendance to K-12 school, telehealth and telemedicine.

The County of Los Angeles' Supervisors have approved a 40 million dollar (\$40M) solicitation for the build-out of a wireless-only infrastructure in 7 low-income regions in Los Angeles County. These regions are the result of the decades-long *digital red-lining* the telecommunications industry executed on these neighborhoods. The reason: these neighborhoods will never afford the rigged price scheme of fiber to the home.

At first glance, most of us will concur with the intent of the \$40M proposal. I mean, why shouldn't these neighborhoods harmed by an industry practice get free Internet from a wireless network? But, upon closer inspection – said wireless network will leave these communities at the bottom rung of the technology ladder for the next decade. Meaning, Internet speeds offered by the wireless network and the equipment used to connect to the wireless network will be obsolete in 2-3 years. Which begs the burning question: would not the \$40M be better placed in subsidizing the current rich resources already in existence through our schools and libraries - while the fiber-to-the-home network is built-out? And should not part of the \$40M be used to begin the process of looking at fair pricing? [When vetted against global markets, Internet pricing is double for US consumers compared to what Europeans pay for the exact same thing.](#) The number one barrier to people accessing the Internet is affordability.

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If, at this moment, we are saying we must build wireless infrastructure because "**these people**" will never be able to afford fiber, then we have created a permanent 'separate, but equal' digital segregation regime; which we know from what history has taught us - separate yes, but **never** equal.

We need to clean-up the narrative, and stop the creation of the second greatest irony of the century; wherein we claim we must expeditiously rush the completion of telecommunication infrastructure, through wireless-only networks; using proposals that claim to "swiftly" and cost efficiently connect the digital divide to on-line resources; when said rush will in fact leave this very community designated to benefit - at the bottom rung of the technology ladder – with Internet speeds of today, for the next decade. The second greatest irony of the century is this race to obsolescence, resulting in double the cost of what a fiber-optic build-out costs and ten times the energy consumption compared to fiber.

Look, it took us 25 years to get here. We are not going to solve it in 2 years. Building-out an end-to-end fiber network - for all households - will take at least a decade. But we must ask ourselves, where do we want to be in 10 years? All(majority) of households connected via fiber-optics, or not? This education and wrestling the narrative back into the interest of the people is paramount and must be part of our everyday conversations relating to the economy and delivery of key services – all Americans use.

Larry Ortega
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Larry is an advocate for digital civil rights, access to key resources at better than decent speeds. In collaboration with teams of community leaders, elected officials, and college students, Community Union, Inc., a nonprofit organization founded in 1993, under his leadership - has graduated more than 35,000 students from its training programs offered throughout the state of California in digital divide neighborhoods. Larry believes ensuring all families - regardless of race or income level – having high-speed fiber-optic access to on-line resources, improves quality of life for everyone.

Links to cite references:

1. [BEAD NOFO.pdf \(doc.gov\)](#)
2. [SB 717 - California Senate \(20212022\) - Open States](#)
3. [OECD broadband statistics update - OECD](#)
4. [MYTH BUSTER: Fiber vs. Fixed Wireless Access – L. A. Ortega \(laortega.com\)](#)
5. [America's 'Triple Play' Prices Overcharged up to \\$175.00 Per Month or More – Over \\$2,000.00 Per Year. | by bruce kushnick | Medium](#)