ORGANIZER ROUNDTABLE: BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

As the Internet and other information technologies have transformed our lives, we now benefit from greater connectivity to educational, employment and social opportunities in the Twin Cities. Yet low-income communities, communities of color, and immigrant communities often don’t have this access which disconnects them from the essential resources that technology can provide. According to a recent story in the Twin Cities Daily Planet, 53 percent of all low-income households in the region are not online. The article states that “about one in five (21 percent) mention price-related reasons, and a similar number cite usability issues (such as not knowing how to go online or being psychologically able to).”

The Alliance for Metropolitan Stability gathered organizers and community leaders from around the region to discuss this topic at our most recent Organizer Roundtable: Bridging the Digital Divide. Presenters Corrine Bruning, James Robinson, Christopher Mitchell, and Abdi Ali, shared with roundtable participants their strategies for providing technology access to underserved communities in our region.

Corrine Bruning is the outreach coordinator for E-Democracy, an organization that uses online tools to support participation in public life, strengthen communities and build democracy. These online forums, which are neighborhood-driven, are a place to share events and community announcements, and dialogue about community issues.

Although E-Democracy does not work on technology access or training, Corrine said that one of the organization’s goals is to elevate the voices of low-income communities and communities of color in these forums. The way she sees it, the online forums grant people who are not traditionally at decision-making tables an opportunity to express their issues and concerns for their community.

But one the biggest barriers that E-Democracy experiences is connecting all community members to the online opportunities for resource sharing and dialogue. E-Democracy is an online organization, and not all Twin Citans are online. To reach the many low-income people who don’t have ready access to the Internet, E-Democracy has turned to traditional community organizing techniques, engaging people through door-knocking and leafleting.

James Robinson teaches technology classes at the Hennepin County Library. He said that the demand for services outstrips the library’s capacity because the need is so great. Still, he notes the progress that has been made over the years. When he first became interested in bridging the digital divide 11 years ago, the main task was getting organizations and policymakers to realize that there was a divide. As a result of raising awareness of this issue, he says, “More people are online than ever before, but we are not done.”

James believes that the divide is still there because many people are unable to keep up with the evolving technological advances over the years. For low-income people, this is particularly important because the Internet is a primary place people now connect to job opportunities. As opposed to 10 years ago, it is essential to be able to search and apply for a job online. In addition, because the job market is so competitive it is expedient for job applicants to have well-crafted
online profiles through sites such as Linked-In. However, many would-be applicants are cut off from these opportunities simply because they do not know how to access them. Unfortunately, the people who are not there are disproportionately people of color, who likewise have the highest unemployment rates. James believes that one way to bridge this employment divide is to also bridge the digital divide. Every time he helps someone set up an email account for the first time, James knows that he is helping people take the first step in that direction.

Abdi Ali, an employment specialist with the Broadband Access Project, shared the importance that broadband access has in opening up employment opportunities in the communities that he has worked in. The Broadband Access Project is a partnership between the University and 12 community organizations to bridge the digital divide in Minneapolis and St. Paul by providing computers and technology classes to low-income communities, communities of color and immigrant communities. Abdi believes that this project has been largely successful because it has reached out to people who did not previously know about computers. “It has given people the tools that can help them succeed, tools that they did not have the ability to access themselves, including job opportunities,” he said.

The main barrier that Abdi recognizes with programs like his is sustainability over the long haul. The project is reliant on consistent funding streams to purchase enough technology for the communities that need it. Another barrier that Abdi identified was helping everyone in the community to know about the resources available to them, which again emphasizes the need for direct organizing.

According to Christopher Mitchell, a researcher for the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, one of the biggest barriers to ensuring that individuals have access to the Internet and other technologies is affordability. Because a few companies control the majority of broadband access, the prices are often not competitive and are often financially out of reach for many people. Out of frustration of these ever increasing prices, communities around the country are stepping up to build their own broadband plans, which provide more access to more people.

According to Christopher’s latest research, Broadband at the Speed of Light, more than 150 communities across the country have successfully built their own broadband networks. His work specifically highlights the efforts of Chattanooga, TN, Lafayette, LA, and Bristol, VA who understood that without building their own networks that “they would be left behind in the transition to the digital economy of the Internet era.”

Minneapolis also took the initiative to build its own wireless Internet network. However, community groups and nonprofits realized that without great intentionality, many Minneapolis residents would still not be able to access this resource at an affordable rate. The Digital Inclusion Coalition, which the Alliance was a member of, secured a community benefits agreement to govern the city’s plan. This agreement provides a variety of resources to bridge the digital divide, including funds to help community groups implement technology access projects.

Realizing the success of this coalition, a task force in St. Paul got together to make sure that they were not left behind. Unfortunately, Christopher shared, “the economy tanked, taking the opportunity to provide affordable Internet access to St. Paul residents with it.” He asked, “What can we do to connect everyone to these services as we move forward?” Christopher believes that there is an opportunity for individual cities within the region to build their own service networks. When
the community owns the broadband, they can set their own prices and provide more access to more people.

Corrine, James, Abdi and Christopher all represent different organizations that are doing their part to bridge the digital divide. Each organization’s emphasis and expertise is needed to make sure that communities across the Twin Cities region have access to the opportunities that the Internet and other technologies afford. As organizers and activists working for equity in the region, we can also play a role in bridging this divide simply by connecting people to the services that are out there.

*For more information on broadband access, public computer centers, technology classes or other training opportunities, please check out the sites listed below:*

Broadband Access Project: [http://www.bap.umn.edu/centers](http://www.bap.umn.edu/centers)

St. Paul Public Library classes: [http://www.sppl.org/events-and-classes](http://www.sppl.org/events-and-classes)

Hennepin County Library classes: [http://www.hclib.org/pub/events/AllEventsAction.cfm](http://www.hclib.org/pub/events/AllEventsAction.cfm)


Main Street Project: [http://mainstreetproject.org/](http://mainstreetproject.org/)

Center for Media Justice: [http://centerformediajustice.org/](http://centerformediajustice.org/)