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An introduction to the topic (4 pts.)

Movements in American civil rights have historically been accompanied by dual legislations: laws protecting civil liberties and laws expanding the role of government. Unfortunately, these movements are typically paired with violence and unrest. The Covid-19 pandemic was another such crisis which led to progressive social action and progressive legislation. In the sector of Education, one issue became omnipresent: the "digital divide" and the "homework gap" that follows. Many students were placed in a position where they were asked to conduct classes remotely without the proper equipment. The consequences of this disconnection during the pandemic were that students faced one or more of the following "obstacles" or variables: they could do homework on a cell phone, use public Wi-Fi, or not be able to complete work at all (Vogels). Income correlation was stark. Racial correlation was mixed. Data from April 2020 show that 59% of low income (less than \$30K/year) parents reported that their student faced one or more of these problems. This calls into question the role of government and its responsibility. A slim majority of Democrats and independents (52%) believe that the government should "ensure" that all Americans have high-speed Internet access. Many other Democrats (48%) are opposed, and most Republicans (77%) are opposed (Vogels). The crisis clouds the spheres of public and private, putting people in desperate situations where some do not have enough to eat.

The problem is that when government assumes that everyone is the same, it forces people to rely on their family, community, and church. These social institutions have become weaker over the years. Some folks have those resources and some folks do not. The Constitution is an outline for how a republic functions within the rule of law. It is the platform of a civil society. It is in the Constitution that government should facilitate the "pursuit of happiness". The people in favor of government intervention

are largely those without means. Those with means argue that they earned a higher income at great personal sacrifice. They found a way to pay for school and earned a well-paying job. Progressive wish lists such as forgiving student debt and providing universal healthcare are separate issues: people sign up for student debt, they do not sign up for health problems. There are many periods in American history where a crisis created an environment where social and legislative progress were delivered: The Civil War, the Great Depression, and the Great Society.

When the United States was founded, the tension was not between socialism and capitalism, it was between landowners (Jefferson) and industrialists (Hamilton) (Teaching History.org). Landowners favored an agrarian society and relied on slave labor to conduct business. Industrialists fought for workers' rights in factories in the North. This tension eventually led to the Civil War. The abolitionist movement was progressive. Freedom did not come without violence, and slavery itself is a violent vile institution. In 1861, Lincoln's first inauguration was threatened with violence (Ruane 2021). This occurred in the same location as the events of January 6, 2021, but the 1861 attack and the U.S. military response were far more organized. Violence and unrest typically come during tense times when citizens become frustrated with the peaceful political process. Abolitionists led John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry (History.com). The police killed Bonus Marchers in 1932 (NPR 2011). The Black panthers were violent, and the insurrectionists of January 6 were murderers. This violence is not something that only happens in other countries. It happens here. Every time tension boils over. Today, the fight is not agrarian against industrialism, the fight is socialism against capitalism, and it is just as volatile. (B. Morra, personal communication, March 20, 2021)

The cliché is that poverty today is "easier to endure and harder to escape". That became true with the New Deal and the Great Society. These safety net programs were designed to assist those without wealth, without a family to fall back on and a community that was just as lucky as they were. The question now is, what will Biden do in response to Covid-19 that will make lasting changes in citizens' perception of the role of government? If we want the political freedom to redefine family and marriage, we may have to also redefine the role of government.

Why you picked this topic? Why is it interesting to you? (2 pts)

I picked this topic because I believe it is a matter of life and death. Education is a matter of life and death. Modernizing the public's perception of government has resulted in protest, violence, murder, and suicide (Hermann 2021). It should not be debated that one primary goal of government is to provide as much peace as possible within the homeland. We do not have peace in the homeland. Domestic terrorism is our greatest threat (Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2021). Trump laid the stage for and created precedent for a competent autocrat who would not simply stumble upon history, but make history, take history, and take life. This has happened before and if we do not do something about it, it will happen again. If the government does not provide opportunity, per se, should they not create a framework in which life is peaceful, and success is possible. I put my trust in Biden.

Everything you can tell about the topic from your research. Be creative. (15 pts.)

When schools closed in March 2020, 55.1million K-12 students were affected and told to study from home (Ali and Herrera 2020). The students who were affected by the digital divide were between 15-16 million and were without either Internet or a reliable device. Nine million students lacked both (Chandra, Chang, Day, Fazlullah, Liu, McBride, Mudalige, and Weiss 2020). These students were disproportionately low income and students of color. For example, 20% of African American students ages 3-18 and 21% of low income (less than \$40k/year) families did not have Internet (Ali and Herrera 2020). Schools had to consider which materials could be printed, what to do about homeless students, whether the district could provide hardware, which services students had to do without (food, mental health, transportation), teacher training and technical support, the mental and emotional toll on students, and the role of parents who may be essential workers (Ali and Herrera 2020).

The problem had been building. Two years earlier, in 2018, 15% of homes "with school-aged children d[id] not have a high-speed Internet connection at home" (Anderson and Perrin 2). Hardware was also an issue. In 2018, 25% of teens from families making less than \$30K did not have a reliable computer to work on. Only 4% of teens in the \$75K+ group lacked a computer (Anderson and Perrin 4).

The estimated cost for permanently closing the student digital divide is "between \$6 billion and \$11 billion in the first year and between \$4 billion and \$8 billion annually thereafter". For teachers, who are disconnected, it will cost \$1 billion in the first year (Ali, Chandra., Cherukumilli, Fazlullah, Hill, McAlpine, McBride, Vaduganathan, Weiss, Wu 6). In October 2020, as the pandemic was in shambles, a group of "educators, librarians, school counselors, and students" asked Congress to spend \$12 billion closing the digital divide (Ali, Chandra., Cherukumilli, Fazlullah, Hill, McAlpine, McBride, Vaduganathan, Weiss, Wu 7). By October, the CARES Act measures were in place, active, and not yet expired. Seventy-five percent of these measures are short-term and will expire within 1-3 years (Ali, Chandra., Cherukumilli, Fazlullah, Hill, McAlpine, McBride, Vaduganathan, Weiss, Wu 5).

The CARES Act was passed in March 2020. States used the CARES Act funding to close "20% to 40% of the K-12 connectivity divide and 40% to 60% of the device divide as of December 2020." (Ali, Chandra., Cherukumilli, Fazlullah, Hill, McAlpine, McBride, Vaduganathan, Weiss, Wu 5) In January 2021, 12 million students were still disconnected (5) In addition to the variables of affordability, availability, and adoption, the cause of post-CARES disconnection was "poor broadband mapping data, current infrastructure and supply chains, insufficient marketing and adoption support, and inadequate funding" (5) Racially, most of the benefit of CARES was seen in the Black community, and Latinx and Native Americans continued to struggle. The variables that were addressed were affordability and adoption. Availability is a much more long-term investment that cannot be solved by purchasing 300 Chromebooks. It requires infrastructure spending (5).

In December 2020, Congress passed another relief bill which provided \$50 billion in funding for K-12 schools. The money was earmarked for "pandemic-related expenses including distance learning". The method of delivery was "broadband-specific funding for data collection, expanded broadband infrastructure deployment, broadband service cost support, and other digital inclusion support with a special focus on vulnerable communities" (5). Although this represents significant spending, critics claimed it was not "targeted", not "sufficient" and not long-term (Ali, Chandra., Cherukumilli, Fazlullah,

Hill, McAlpine, McBride, Vaduganathan, Weiss, Wu 5). Moving forward, this issue needs to be tackled by more policy and more funding.

Students affected by the digital divide primarily reside in the South and more rural areas. "40% to 50% of students in Alabama, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Mississippi are affected" (Ali, Chandra., Cherukumilli, Fazlullah, Hill, McAlpine, McBride, Vaduganathan, Weiss, Wu 5) Racially, they are "disproportionately affects Black, Latinx, and Native American students" (5); 55% of disconnected students are racial minorities, although they account for only 40% of the population (5). Income is the most common factor, 50% of disconnected students come from families making less than \$50K a year (5) The same three factors are generally discussed in digital divide research: "affordability, availability, and adoption" (5) Affordability impacts 60% of students who simply cannot afford Internet (5). Availability refers to students who would connect if their home allowed it; 25% of disconnected students "lack access" (5), this includes rural and Native American students. Most upper income students who do not have Internet face adoption issues, "such as insufficient digital literacy or language barriers" (5); this affects 40% of students, which is even more than availability (Ali, Chandra., Cherukumilli, Fazlullah, Hill, McAlpine, McBride, Vaduganathan, Weiss, Wu 5).

In October 2018, Pew Research Center wrote a report that they then updated in September 2020. In 2018, the data are as follows: the results of not having Internet are that students have to complete homework using a cell phone (35%), they are unable to complete it at all (17%), or they use a public Wi-Fi outside the home (12%). (Anderson and Perrin 3). The breakdown is that most of these students come from low-income, racial minority homes. However, I would say that it is alarming that 29% of students from families with incomes of \$75k or more still have to use a cell phone to finish homework. That is not far below the average of 35%. For families of less than \$30k the figure is 45% of students complete work using a phone (Anderson and Perrin 3) As far as race, it is not as simple as only racial minorities fit these categories. White students outpace certain other groups in this graph in two out of three categories. More Whites than Blacks complete work on a cell phone (35% to 30%) and more Whites than Hispanics use public Wi-Fi (11% to 9%). The variable that never changes is income. No money, no Internet (Anderson

and Perrin 3). As far as hardware, 25% of teens from families making less than \$30K do not have a reliable computer to work on. Only 4% of teens in the \$75K+ group lack hardware. (Anderson and Perrin 4). This also affects teachers. In total, 15% of homes "with school-aged children do not have a high-speed Internet connection at home" (Anderson and Perrin 2).

The report in 2020, uses the same three "obstacles"/variables as the previous report: complete homework on a cell phone, use public Wi-Fi, or not able to complete work at all. In this report, a pool of 4,917 parents were surveyed from April 7 – 12 2020. Data show that 59% of low-income parents reported that their student faced one or more of these problems and that "parents with middle incomes were about twice as likely as parents with higher incomes to report anticipating issues." Income for the survey was based on 2018 figures and therefore does not include lost wages from the pandemic (Vogels 2020). It would have been nice if the rest of the report was a one-to-one match of the 2018 report, however, instead of looking deeply at race, income, and geography, this report analyzes party affiliation and education level.

Democrats and independents are more likely to say to government has a responsibility to pay, 52% of Democrats and only 22% of Republicans say government should pay, but a large number of Democrats are opposed at 48% (Vogels 2020). In 2019, 28% of Americans said the government should ensure access and Internet should be treated as a public utility. In 2020, it went up to 37%. However, Americans are more passionate about funding for other issues, such as medical care and health insurance. The interesting development is that 80% of Americans support funding for K-12 education, which is now hand in glove with Internet access (Vogels 2020).

The definition of a public utility is that it is either publicly or privately owned but is "deemed essential for modern living" (Toh). Currently, services such as, "electricity, gas, water, sewerage and phone lines" qualify as public utilities. Internet access during the pandemic is important for ordering "food and supplies" as well as "access to information" and the obvious luxury of working from home, especially for those in high-risk groups. As Toh puts it, "staying home has become literally a matter of life and death".

Concerning the role of government, utilities are not in the Constitution, but Internet access is in the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights : "Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits." (Toh). Internet access is so important that not having it is more similar to not having electricity than not having a phone line (Toh). The reason that Internet cannot be available everywhere is that delivery is not the same as other utilities. "The companies that benefit the most from more people going online - think content providers, publishers, social networks, etc. - don't pay toward the provision of the Internet, for Internet hardware or for extending and improving the web's infrastructure and reach." (Toh) In rich countries, most people who do not have Internet are in poor or rural areas where the ROI of availability investment is lower because people will spend less money online and "because for-profit organizations can't make sufficient returns from improving access" (Toh) "In its 2020 Global Social Mobility Index, the World Economic Forum included technology access as one of 10 pillars contributing, with equal weight, to a nation's social mobility score, alongside factors such as health and access to education." (Toh) But in a Covid world, technology IS access to education.

How you can/will apply what you have learned about this topic to your current job or a future job?

(5 pts.)

My professional ambition has always been to utilize technology to accomplish policy objectives. This goal presupposes connection. I do believe that issues of equity can be solved through technology instead of policy, but that is not what is happening. The gulf is widening. The research proves that policy and funding need to be in place to allow technology to be used as an equalizer. If that does not happen, some students will be using AR/VR and some students will be writing paper and pencil packets. In my current job, I work in IT for this university. I wish I had been in IT when the pandemic hit because IT was tasked with providing connection to certain staff members who faced adoption barriers. They had no interest in having Internet at home. From my work, I believe that most of these individuals were outfitted with mobile hotspots, which the university provided. I met one of these staff members last Fall

and he did not know how to connect to the Internet using Wi-Fi or Ethernet. I wrote him a long email explaining the three different modes of connection and possible scenarios in which you might use one of these modes. Then he called me a week later to say that the Ethernet cable was stuck in his laptop and he could not remove it. I brought my tools and had to totally remove the chassis. I gave him a refresher course on Wi-Fi connection and he seems to be doing okay. If we can get folks like that online, then why can the government not provide Internet to sixteen-year-olds who need to do their homework so that they can go to college?

Nothing we do as instructional designers matters if students cannot access the material. Since the issue disproportionately affects low-income students, we may see students who fell behind during Covid and never caught up. In other parts of the world, some students left school completely and may never go back (India Today 2020). Inequality is the main theme of this industrial age, as the Baby Boomer, American-dominated aberration of history fades. It is far more likely that inequality will prevail. Therefore, my job in IT is ever more important. I need to help these staff and faculty stay connected so that they can teach, research, and perform their jobs seamlessly. I feel a great sense of purpose in this. I feel that the research we support is worthwhile. I hope I have the chance to continue writing about this topic, either academically or professionally.

A summary of the paper. (4 pts.)

There is a wealth of research on the digital divide. It is being addressed by Congress, the FCC, and various non-profit organizations. People are paying attention. Perhaps the Covid crisis will be a turning point in funding and policy, as it has been in practice. No one predicts a return to the way things were before Covid, the government needs to decide if they will allow these temporary measures to expire or if they will change the way schools do business. Higher education, as a sector, has completely changed the way they do business.

Infrastructure investment is needed to increase availability and education about technology is needed to confront adoption issues, which mostly impact the rich. I do not know if the government should expand to provide subsidies for the Internet as a public utility. This is a key moment. I predict that those

who survived Covid will either succeed or fail at extremes. Jeffrey Sachs wrote that the end of poverty was within global reach in 2005. That is not what happened over the next fifteen years. The opposite occurred; as one article wrote during Covid, the rich ordered groceries online, the poor delivered them. The value of human life is at stake and a good education is the only way to live.

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