

THE Skanner

Challenging People to Shape
a Better Future Now

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Wishing all of
our readers a
happy and safe
**Independence
Day**

Opinion

Where Are the Black Mark Zuckerbergs and Latina Sheryl Sandbergs?

The question, which came from a participant in a minority business empowerment seminar, quieted the room. The answer is simple: “They’re out there. But they don’t have a data plan.”

That seems glib. But truth comes best in a simple package. The digital divide is real. Millions of brilliant, creative thinkers are still left behind, because they don’t have affordable access to the Internet. So what can we do to change this paradigm? We can go mobile.

Mobile technology has changed our world. Those of us who are already part of the mobile revolution know this innately: to be without our smartphones is to be isolated. It’s standing in a field, watching the train flash by. It’s trying to find a book in the dark when others are holding flashlights.

But we’re not done yet — not until we’ve brought that change across the digital divide. We know what it means to be connected. And we know that to fully bring change, we



Hill Harper
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Columnist

have to bring that connection to the populations who today may not have access. Mobile tools don’t work when you can’t get to them.

This issue matters more than ever because being “un-

“Creators and innovators need access to the Web to connect with others and to expand their world

connected” now means so much more than not having the chance to stream Netflix or send tweets. It means being unable to access the myriad of business and entrepreneurial opportunities that exist across today’s vibrant technological landscape. It means not having an on-ramp to healthcare and educational information that could trans-

form or save a life. It means being stuck in the 20th century at a time when the 21st century economy is finally kicking into high gear.

Imagine someone who isn’t connected or someone that has a mobile device, but can’t access more online data because they exceeded their monthly allotment. For them, free data could be the key. Free data is an offering that allows you to use more mobile content without having to worry about exceeding your

of a plan, then that might just be enough to entice you to cross the digital divide. And once online, you’ll inevitably use your mobile device to explore the web, allowing your device to be the transformative tool that it can be.

Until we get people online, they may not know the resources on which they’ll build. Creators and innovators need access to the Web to connect with others and to expand their world. Indeed, our embrace of mobile innovations like streaming media and free data can serve as the light we use to illuminate the world around those who remain in the digital dark. Dr. King’s vision of a “world-wide brotherhood” comes from those connections, those ties that grow a fully empowered and engaged community that refuses to let any more opportunities pass us by.

Our vigilance and advocacy will build the momentum we need to close the digital divide once and for all. Join me in this monumental task and be #MobileLikeMe.

Saving Community Newspapers in the Age of Facebook

Hundreds of newspapers have disappeared in the last 15 years and readership is on the decline. No newspaper is immune from the migration of readership to online platforms, dwindling ad revenues, fragmented audiences and even reduced attention spans.

Even national-recognized newspapers with celebrated histories like “The New York Times” and “The Washington Post” have retrenched in the face of these mounting economic pressures. Many regional and community newspapers — including some members of the historic Black Press — are barely hanging on.

The ramifications of this can be profound. Local publica-



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and won’t be any time soon. Rather, it has just moved to an electronic form. Not only that, there are also more opportunities to tell more stories and express more opinions than

“Online hubs like Facebook are able to engineer which stories catch on

tions have long served as the glue that binds communities together. They have served as the microphone for voices that would otherwise be marginalized and the spotlight on the stories that seldom make it onto the front pages of major newspapers and magazines. For African-American communities, the publications that make up the National Newspaper Publishers Association (NNPA) have served as that voice across the nation.

Yet, we are being told that the silver lining is that journalism isn’t disappearing —

ever before. Some have said that we should not mourn the loss of the local newspaper and that we should instead explore the myriad possibilities offered by the new media. Or so goes the mantra.

In reality, this upbeat vision obscures the threat that new media poses to community journalism. And that threat is coming from a most unlikely place — the popular social media platforms that so many of us love. Chief among them is Facebook.

Like many other publishers who have recently written on

Facebook’s growing power over the media and what Americans read, we too are alarmed with one company having such dominance in news aggregation. Online hubs like Facebook are able to engineer which stories catch on. And they’re able to decide by algorithmic fiat, which bylines, viewpoints and subject matter is promoted to the masses.

This is a new kind of power. It is unlike any power a media company has ever had before. A study last year reported that Facebook drove 43 percent of all the traffic to the top 400 news sites. That’s almost half coming from one powerful source!

What’s more, we don’t know how Facebook’s operations work. The tech company isn’t transparent in its methods. So we don’t know whether the viewpoints of Black publishers are heard or if there is a bias against our views. Without knowing how Facebook’s “Trending Topics” or other algorithms are used in promoting stories, the owners of Black-owned newspapers, magazines and other media are left only to wonder why the stories our outlets produce are relegated to the margins — if they are acknowledged at all. Our readers are at the mercy of powers unheard and unseen as never before.

With 63 percent of Americans and 74 percent of millennials going to Facebook

as their source of news, Facebook’s power is only likely to grow in the coming years. And there is something ironic about that. The mainstream media was once derided as unimaginative and monolithic, largely because it had long been dominated by three TV networks and a handful of newspapers in large cities. The Internet was supposed to change all that by bringing a diversity of viewpoints to the table. While this has indeed happened, the emergence of one or even a handful of powerful gatekeepers like Facebook raises profound questions about the nature of news in this country in the years to come.

With so much power in the hands of one company, we risk surrendering our own decisions about what is or isn’t newsworthy to a gatekeeper who may someday push only stories it deems worthy. And that’s a troubling possibility that should worry us all.

It is time regulators took a hard look at Facebook and its news aggregation and promotion practices in an effort to bring some much needed transparency to the new media king. The democratization of the media could be on a collision course with decidedly anti-democratic and arbitrary forces. Think of the proverbial tree that falls silently in the forest because no one is there to hear it. Will Facebook have the power to allow entire forests to fall?