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Billionaire-genius Elon Musk plans to deploy hundreds of low Earth orbit micro-satellites to connect the world's remaining 4.2 billion people without access to the Internet.

A consortium that includes Coca-Cola, Richard Branson's Virgin Group, and other companies is vying to beat him to the punch. Google, meanwhile, is placing its bet on drones and router-touting hot-air balloons to do the job. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg (also a billionaire-genius) is exploring innovative high-tech solutions like solar-powered unmanned aircraft, as well as tried-and-true approaches that involve good old-fashioned carrier companies laying fiber-optic cable and setting up cell phone towers.

This is a lot of intellectual and financial firepower representing the best and boldest of the American private sector. Their technologies and dollars will be critical to extending the education, employment, and social benefits of the Internet to the **43% of the world's population that remains off-line**. Yet, these wealthy investors are overlooking something vital: Technology alone is not sufficient to erase the digital divide. Other barriers, that have nothing whatsoever to do with technology, are equally important.

For a start, affordability is a major barrier to access. While this can be overcome in part by the continued proliferation of high-functional and low-cost mobile devices, growth in global broadband has slowed sharply and prices for fixed-line connections have even increased in the world's least-developed countries (**where an estimated 90% of people have zero Internet connectivity**). Providing public access through schools, libraries and other community gathering points is therefore critical to achieve truly universal service that extends to the poorest and hardest to reach. Often, such public access points are vital first steps to guide communities' first digital steps, and spark demand for connectivity.

Second, digital literacy skills (not to mention basic literacy and numeracy) are as vital to using the Internet as a smart phone or cell tower. Though it may sometimes seem that today's children are born with these capabilities pre-loaded, that is not in fact the case. These skills must be learned, preferably from trusted providers with the user's needs and not their own commercial or political interests as their driving motive. And, ideally, that learning process should be ongoing rather than a one-time interaction.

Third, many of the remaining people not connected to the Internet must overcome barriers that are as much social as economic or technological. Women and girls, in

Daily Times
Editorial: Passage
of Pa. budget would
be a great
Christmas gift

particular, are falling behind in accessing the Internet and its many benefits. International Telecommunications Union estimates, for example, reveal a gender gap of approximately 200 million people worldwide as of 2013.

This gap is particularly evident in the developing world, where 16% fewer women than men used the Internet, compared with only 2% fewer women than men in the developed world. In regions like sub-Saharan Africa, women and girls access the Internet at a rate **40% lower than men and boys**. Connecting women and girls in developing countries requires technology and affordability, but also appropriate venues for accessing the Internet. Whereas frequenting male-dominated Internet cafes is viewed as unseemly or even unsafe in some parts of the world, we know that girls and women will visit public libraries or community centers because they are perceived as safe, reliable, and affordable, and they often allow interaction with trained female staff.

Ultimately, though, ambitious initiatives to connect the world's remaining 4.2 billion will have far more success if they overcome some key non-technical barriers in addition to focusing on the technology itself. This means ensuring that users are fully engaged in the conversation on design, and also how best they can be reached. In addition, it is also important to identify existing public spaces such as libraries, schools, sports clubs and community organizations that can extend Internet access to many who would otherwise be left out through safe, low- or no-cost, female-friendly environments, and to train personnel at these spaces to be the "info-mediaries" that digitally marginalized people need to learn digital literacy.

Finally, focusing particular attention on educators in the developing world, and ensuring that they have the resources and digital literacy skills they need to teach the next generation, will be of utmost importance in reaching future tech users. Simply put, connecting the world's remaining 4.2 billion is about more than viewing the latest cute kitty pictures. Every day, our world grows more reliant on technology and digital information to mediate our economic, civic, health, and educational activities. As a recently published report by the Broadband Commission for Digital Development argues, "A large body of evidence has now been amassed that affordable and effective broadband connectivity is a vital enabler of economic growth, social inclusion and [even] environmental protection."

Moreover, as the world's largest refugee crisis since World War II has unfolded, we have seen how the Internet gives not only access to valuable information and services, but also allows individuals to connect inexpensively with far-flung family members and maintain important family bonds. The fact that so many citizens in both developed and developing countries now access the Internet is a staggering achievement with positive daily consequences for billions of people. But the size and scale of the benefits conferred by the Internet are widening the gaps between the digital haves and have-nots. Those without access are not just left out. They will also find themselves further and further behind. To reach them, we will need not only the smartest technological solutions, but a local, human touch. – **CNN**



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