Policy Recommendations for Meeting the Grand Challenge to

Harness Technology for Social Good

Internet and computer technology has become ubiquitous in modern life. It has created opportunities to connect people across the globe, fundamentally altered the way we work and acquire information, and opened the potential for transformational responses to the world's most pressing social problems. Policy that supports positive use of and expanded access to technology will allow us to leverage these technological advances for social good. This brief presents a series of policy recommendations for addressing the grand challenge to harness technology for social good.

Recommendation 1:
Expand Internet Connectivity for Underserved Households

In our digital society, aspects of everyday life increasingly require use of the Internet. Searching for an apartment, learning about job openings, submitting an employment or college application, getting health information, completing school work, and obtaining government benefits are now primarily done online. Almost three quarters of U.S. households now have high speed Internet in their homes and can avail themselves of these opportunities.[1] However, households without Internet access face a growing number of barriers to full participation in what a technological society has to offer. Internet access rates in many low-income neighborhoods and rural areas area are barely half of those in more advantaged areas. Older individuals and individuals with disabilities also face barriers to Internet access. Without policies to expand Internet access, these populations will fall further behind.

There have been a variety of private and government-supported efforts to increase Internet access. Examples include attempts to build community access points, offer subsidies to low-income subscribers, and fund Internet connectivity in selected schools. These programs have significant limitations, however.[2] Community locations often have time limits on Internet use and leave individuals digitally unconnected when at home. Shallow subsidies are not sufficient to allow very low-income households to afford Internet connections on an ongoing basis. Technological investments in schools have limited reach if parents and children cannot continue the learning process by accessing the Internet at home.

Household access to broadband Internet should no longer be considered optional.[3] Policy should develop programs to assure that underserved populations have reliable and affordable Internet access in their home environments. Communities need better data systems to monitor their progress on achieving Internet connectivity and digital literacy for all.

Recommendation 2:
Unlock Government Data to Drive Solutions to Social Problems

Numerous agencies at all levels of government generate administrative records that could be mined to inform program improvements and policy effectiveness. However, these potentially valuable data often remain restricted and in siloes. Such sequestration limits their usefulness for understanding long-term and cross-system outcomes and for discovering solutions to social problems. Moreover, researchers, policy analysts, and even agency leaders lack access to linked data that they could use to address important social issues.

A growing number of examples demonstrate the value of linked administrative data in efforts to improve policies, evaluate programs, and inform innovations.[4] Yet the development of links among data sets has been constrained by several challenges: incompatible data systems, ambiguity concerning data ownership, multiple sets of regulations pertaining to data sharing and privacy, and other factors that slow the process and add to the costs.

Government agencies at federal, state, and local levels should remove the barriers to systematic linkage of data across agencies and sectors while also safeguarding personally identifiable information and ensuring nondisclosure of confidential data. There is a need to create policy that allows streamlined cross-system data sharing, anonymized methods for case-matching across systems, and government solutions for open data. Additional investment is needed in technology that can broaden access to linked administrative records for the purposes of improving agency effectiveness, generating program evaluation, and stimulating policy analysis.[5] Federal funding incentives that encourage the use of administrative data for policy analysis and program evaluation would advance the science and speed up the production of solutions to social problems.

Recommendation 3:
Open the Possibility of Social Work Practice Across States Lines

The U.S. Constitution consigns to states the regulation of professions such as social work. Regulation, through social work licensure, protects the public and advances the profession. Historically, licensing at the state-level has been sufficient to meet practice needs; most social work services were provided within a geographic area and reflected the needs of specific regions, yet this model is becoming obsolete. Social work education is accredited at a national level through the Council on Social Work Education. Social workers in

all 50 states and the District of Columbia take licensure exams administered by the Association of Social Work Boards. In the era of telehealth and online service delivery, cross-state social-work practice would benefit clients who have difficultly accessing treatment because of geography or specialized needs. Restricting licensed practice by state fails to protect consumers who receive online services from providers in other states. It also sets up providers to violate state laws and regulations governing practice. Social workers with specialized skills are less likely to offer services online without the protection provided by licensure. These barriers leave providers with few incentives to develop best practices for online therapy.

Policy action should therefore include the development of multistate practice parameters. State licensure boards should develop interstate compacts that facilitate multistate practice. The Association of Social Work Boards should develop model state legislation to facilitate interstate practice. Opening the possibility for interstate practice will enable the development and growth of digital practice methods and broaden access to specialized services across state lines.

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End Notes

1. File and Ryan (2014).
2. Rideout and Katz (2016).
3. Broadband Opportunity Council (2015).
4. Culhane, Fantuzzo, Rouse, Tam, and Lukens (2010).
5. Evidenced-Based Policymaking Commission Act (2016).

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