Google project could widen gap in Kansas City between computer haves and have nots

Super-fast service will help many families but could leave have-not group further behind.

By SCOTT CANON

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Gail Hampton sees a lot in what the Internet has to offer.

It's a way to learn about the world, to make life more convenient, to be part of the Information Age.

But she lost her computer when it was seized after she fell behind on her rent during a jobless spell.

Occasionally she'll check her Gmail account at the offices of Metro Lutheran Ministries, but even that's a tough task to coordinate with her work schedule.

She'd like to get a computer and Internet service for her midtown Kansas City apartment, especially with Google soon to launch its warp-speed infobahn in Kansas City.

"You can use it to see so many things before you even walk out the door," said the 55-year-old security guard. "I just don't have the money."

It's as if there's already a technology highway running through town that's of no use to her because she can't pay a toll. Now there's about to be a bullet train available and she can't afford a ticket.

Google's ultra-fast Internet holds the promise of game-changing technology for most of Kansas City, but it's a game that people like Hampton might not get to play. At least one in five Kansas City households, maybe as many as one in four, live entirely offline.

As Kansas City gets a faster Internet, more essential day-to-day activities will inevitably move online. And as they do, they can become even harder to do offline.

We're on a course toward the information highway, or no way.

Imagine that somebody else's kid can research and file his homework without leaving the bedroom, but your daughter has to fight for computer time at the library. Or your neighbor can videoconference with her doctor from her living room, but because you lack the mega-fast Internet, you have to drive to an appointment. Banks and other institutions are already steering people to websites, and raising fees on customers doing things in person.

"It's only going to be more important not to be left behind," said David Baker, a vice president at the Illinois Institute of Technology and a member of a Chicago task force that studied the technology difference between rich and poor.

Simple economics dictate that service counters will be replaced with computer servers. And in the end, a certain gravity will form around the online version of things. Those outside that orbit could find themselves unable to reach or afford things in their Web-less world.

"Whether it's online banking or other day-to-day tools, you can see the shift happening already," said Christopher Barnickel, the assistant director of the Kansas City, Kan., Public Library.

The Google-powered Internet service is set to debut in Kansas City, Kan., this summer, and likely across the state line a few months later. It figures to jet much of Kansas City across the Web at speeds 100 times faster than most home Internet connections can today. It could launch yet-to-be-imagined uses for the Internet only possible with instantaneous exchanges of mountains of data.

More than 1,000 U.S. cities lobbied to be first to get the service and its hopes for better schooling, smarter health care and new ways to find work and entertainment online.

Yet in doing so, the Google Fiber project risks widening the digital divide between computer haves and have nots.

On one side sit the more educated and wealthier. They have easier access to news, education, government services and, sometimes, employment. Across the divide are the generally less schooled and less prosperous — effectively shut out from the majority's go-to medium for getting answers and results to so much of 21st century life.

Google says it will sell its Internet service at roughly what residential customers pay now for conventional hookups. So with the exception of free service to some schools, libraries and municipal buildings, Google won't be giving away Internet access for free. The company has said "this is not a charity. … It's a business."

Ray Daniels, a former Kansas City, Kan., Schools superintendent who helps lead a task force looking to leverage the most out of Google's coming service, says he's concerned about whether people are going to be able to afford the Google service.

"It isn't just the cost of hooking up and paying for it every month, it's the gadget" — a desktop or laptop computer, an electronic tablet — that can put an Internet connection to work, Daniels said.

For its part, Google hasn't said yet whether it might discount service for poorer families or offer devices for homes that don't yet have Internet-ready devices.

"We're gathering data and taking time to learn about the digital divide issues in Kansas City," Kevin Lo, the general manager of Google Access, said in an email.

There may be some shortcuts. Google's free service to about 450 public facilities across Kansas City, Kan., and Kansas City, Mo., means libraries and community centers, for instance, could offer access.

Yet there may be limits to that. Already, libraries in both Kansas Cities report that almost all their Internet-connected computers are occupied all day. Patrons often sign on to waiting lists to take their turn at a screen.

Being left out

There's no point in emailing Thomas Hayslett. The 54-year-old Kansas Citian doesn't have the money for a computer and certainly doesn't have the money to plop down for monthly Internet service.

He falls into a sizable portion of Kansas City, anxious that what might propel others ahead could leave him out.

"It'll put me way behind," said Hayslett, an unemployed warehouse worker. "I really don't know much about using a computer. And I can't afford it."

An important part of what people do online already is learn — looking at how-tos on websites, reading about public affairs, connecting with people and sharing ideas.

"The Web is where we find information and make sense of it," said Simran Sethi, a University of Kansas journalism professor who teaches a course on social media. "To be separate from that is not to participate fully in our democracy."

Make no mistake, said Kansas City Public Library Director Crosby Kemper III, Google's service is a giant plus for the community.

But, he said, "There is the view in Technoland that everybody's got a phone or a computer and is connected. It's simply not the case," he said. "Go to the Bluford library or the North-East library

and there are tons and tons of kids who are on our computers or waiting for our computers to look for summer jobs."

By comparing Kansas City's population to national studies about Internet access, the Mid-America Regional Council estimated that more than 47,000 households or 143,000 people lack Internet access at home. Simply bringing in a faster service at a competitive price doesn't change that equation, Kemper said.

In fact, he said Google officials told him they'll concentrate on connecting first the neighborhoods where people are likely to buy the service. (Google has not said publicly which neighborhoods will be first, although it has suggested that interest from residents could guide the rollout.)

Google certainly would have a commercial incentive to target affluent neighborhoods first. It has said it wants to know what happens when lots of people have extreme broadband in their homes.

Creating hurdles

The fat data pipe the tech titan promises does offer possible ways to dramatically lower the cost of Internet access — if Google would play along.

Let's say a customer pays roughly $50 a month today to Time Warner Cable for an ordinary Internet connection. Assume hypothetically Google charges about $50 a month for its service. The Google broadband is so broad that if Google allows it, a customer could share a connection or Wi-Fi with nine other people in her apartment building. People do similar things today, often tapping into a Wi-Fi network their neighbor failed to protect with a password.

In that scenario, each household would pay $5 a month and get Internet speeds still about 10 times faster than what might cost them $50 today. That might make the purchase of an electronic tablet — some popular models sell for less than $200 — affordable.

Google could easily object and might be able to build in technical hurdles to such co-ops. After all, such setups could cut into revenue.

Maybe as important, said Kansas State University computer scientist Dan Andresen, sharing connections could muddy Google's ability to study changes brought on by the new service. "One of the main values for Google is getting information about what people do online," he said.

But that would be harder to do if gigabit speeds are cut into hundreds of megabits and split among families.

In Kansas City, Kan., high school students already tap into the Web with school district-issued laptops. But it hasn't been cheap. Even in bulk, the district pays about $900 per unit. And though families are eligible for deeply discounted Internet connections from Time Warner, a survey found that two in five students don't have the Internet at home. So some hang outside school buildings before and after school to tap into the district's Wi-Fi.

Bridging the gap

Miami is among several cities that have tried to narrow the digital divide. Its Elevate Miami program stationed Internet-fed computers in community centers and senior centers and conducted remedial classes on Web surfing.

"A big part of it was just getting people to understand how the Internet might have some value for their everyday lives," said Jim Osteen, who ran the program. The city received Internet service donations from Comcast Corp. and software contributed by Microsoft Corp., but still struggled to pay instructors and buy computers.

"There's no getting around the cost," Osteen said.

Amid the push to draw more people to Internet life, there are some signs that maybe it's not yet essential to modern life. Jonathan Pfannenstiel of Tonganoxie, Kan., takes some of his classes at Kansas City Kansas Community College online. It's a time saver, he says, but it's not a good fit for math classes and others where he likes in-person one-on-one instruction.

"It's better to have a bricks-and-mortar thing sometimes," he said.

One study even found that Internet access in the home, at least for children in fourth through eighth grades, actually tends to lower test scores in math and reading. It's proof, perhaps, that the Web sets up a competition between much-admired educational offerings like the tutorials from Kahn Academy and time destroyers like World of Warcraft.

"And our findings were before social media," said researcher Helen Ladd, a professor of public policy at Duke University. "This doesn't mean students shouldn't have computers at school. It's just that Internet in the home might not give you what you hope it will."

Even if the Internet isn't a panacea, and may even be a distraction to tweens, it's still easy to believe Internet access is an increasingly critical resource.

Matthew Titterington takes online classes at Kansas City Kansas Community College. Because he doesn't have Internet access at home, he must drive to the campus.

Even then, the classes come up short in a way that a faster Internet, perhaps a Google-style gigabit-speed Internet, might fix.

"It would be nice if you could talk back and forth with the professor," Titterington said. "And the (current) connection at school, when everybody's on there using it, is a little slow."