

Guest column:

Open accessibility to the internet vital to development of technology

By **Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto and Jessica Rosenworcel**

Friday, Jan. 12, 2018 | 2 a.m.

This week, tens of thousands of innovators, engineers, policymakers, and thought leaders from around the globe have descended on Las Vegas to meet at CES and share what is new and next in our digital world.



It's an exciting gathering at an important time. That's because the future is coming at us faster than ever. Smart transportation systems, including connected vehicles, are poised to change how we drive, reducing traffic congestion and accidents. Drones that deliver medical equipment can change how we respond to emergencies. The ability to send photos and videos directly from devices to first responders can radically improve public safety response.

But with these incredible new innovations and opportunities, new challenges also arise — from supporting cybersecurity to ensuring that gatekeepers don't get in the way of our internet experience. It's critical to ask questions now, at the get-go, so that the opportunities stemming from these new technologies are as inclusive as possible — and can improve the lives of everyone. In that spirit, here are a few questions we hope spark conversation during this time in Las Vegas and beyond:

How do we ensure an internet that is open to future innovation?

We believe that it is vital to protect our freedom online to go where we want and do what we want without our broadband provider getting in the way.

However, just a few weeks ago the FCC rolled back its net neutrality rules. As a result, our broadband providers now have the legal right to block content, throttle speeds and engage in pay-for-play prioritization deals that can change our experience online.

This is troubling. Because while we don't know what the next game-changing inventions will be, you can bet they involve the internet. It's important to ensure that connecting to our online world remains open and fair to everyone who creates and consumes online. The fight for this openness is not over. Expect action in court and in Congress. We will not give up — and we hope you won't, either.

How do we increase diversity in science, technology, engineering and math?

Right now, women hold almost half of the jobs in our economy, but only 24 percent of the jobs in STEM fields. This math needs to change. Because STEM jobs are growing at six times the rate of other occupations and STEM workers earn 29 percent more than their non-STEM counterparts, the diversity of these new opportunities should reflect the full diversity of our country.

It's time to use clubs, classes and apprenticeships to build a more diverse STEM pipeline. It's also important to support legislative efforts with an eye to the same — like the Code Like a Girl Act.

Plus, we can take note of initiatives like the one at UNR, where an effort is underway to increase the participation of low-income first-generation students from underrepresented communities to pursue careers in the life sciences.

How do we guarantee a fair shot at digital age success for every American, including the next generation?

Already, there is no part of our lives that are untouched by the internet. Everything from starting a business to applying for jobs to doing homework now requires online access. But it's especially cruel that 12 million kids nationwide are regularly assigned homework that requires internet access but they lack broadband at home.

This is known as the Homework Gap. Too many of our students are falling into this gap and at a moment when digital skills are essential for future success find themselves consigned to the wrong side of the digital divide. It's a problem that our communities, states and nation need to fix. If we do, the next generation of digital creators coming to Las Vegas to gather will be even bolder and bigger than the community gathering here this week.

These questions may not have easy answers. But it's time to get going and resolve them.

Because if we get them right, the digital future will be more powerful, more potent, more exciting and more beneficial — for all of us. And we think that's a future worth fighting for.

Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto, D-Nev., was elected to the Senate in November 2016 after serving two terms as Nevada attorney general. Jessica Rosenworcel is a member of the Federal Communications Commission.

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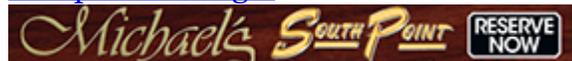
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