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Letters to the Editor

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Closing the digital divide

When Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and others founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957, there was no question as to the vast divide that separated white and black Americans in all aspects of life from public accommodations, transportation, education and equity in the criminal justice systems. Although we have made tremendous strides during the past half-century, there are new frontiers that demand the attention of civil rights organizations in order to maintain our relevancy.

One of those areas is the growing digital divide in our country. A recent study by the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights found that the digital divide continues to expand in America finding that blacks and Latinos are much less likely than Whites to have access to home computers and Internet access.

These findings come at a time when our Congress and Senate are debating two critical pieces of legislation (H.R. 3146 and S. 1349) which cable companies claim would permit telephone companies to avoid essential anti-discrimination provisions. The cable companies claim the legislation would allow telephone companies to target more affluent communities for broadband service while ignoring poor and rural communities and failing to offer them the latest advanced digital services. SCLC has reviewed the proposed legislation, and in our opinion these claims are baseless and the tactics that are being used by the cable company run afoul of common decency.

The cable companies would have Americans believe that companies such as Verizon are attempting to pass new Jim Crow legislation that would block poor and underserved communities from traveling on the information highway, and we find such comparisons offensive. This unfair playing of the race card is not only unwarranted, but is the type of dirty politics that is destroying the moral fiber of America.

The fact of the matter is that these tactics are not about protecting consumers against discrimination, but rather protecting the bottom line profits of the cable industry. According to a September 2005 Wall Street Journal article, cable bills have been rising much faster than the inflation rate. However, consumers have seen price wars emerge in communities where Verizon has begun offering high-speed Internet; so increased competition in the TV industry will undoubtedly result in lower prices for consumers.

A review of the proposed legislation clearly states that "A competitive video service provider shall not deny services to any group of potential residential subscribers because of the income of the residents of the local area in which such group resides." In other words, the legislation has a clear anti-redlining provision that strengthens the

Communications Act of 1934. However, the bill should be amended to include adequate enforcement against video providers who violate the anti-redlining provisions to ensure the protection of poor and underserved communities.

The passage of such an amended Video Choice Act of 2005 would result in legislation that promotes competition among broadband providers, provides lower prices and better service for consumers, and protects consumers against discriminatory practices.

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