Driving Progress; Advancing Digital Inclusivity for Maximum Impact

By Ainol Shaharina Sahar, Director of Yayasan TM

In the past decade, we have seen digital tech permeating into almost every aspect of our daily lives. The early days of using social media started reshaping the ways we interact with our friends, while the ways we consumed entertainment has evolved into seamless streaming services, not to mention the various creative ways of using content for sales and direct marketing. In various aspects, many of us now take digital tools and services for granted.

How the pandemic has propelled digital revolution can be found in multiple studies. For example, a report by Google, Temasek and Bain & Company highlights that more than 40 million people in Southeast Asia connected to the internet for the first time in 2020. One in three digital consumers were new to services, such as virtual learning or online grocery shopping. Furthermore, 90% of these new users expressed an intention to continue with digital services in the post-pandemic era.

TODAY, THE INTERNET IS SOCIETY'S BACKBONE

Consequently, our usage of the internet today has accelerated immensely and has become an all-encompassing utility, serving many of our core societal needs including education, food production, and sustaining social connectivity.

With so much of the world's activity enabled and dependent on the internet, we are confronted with an undisputable reality: Digital access is no longer a privilege, it is now a basic need – recognised even 10 years ago when the Internet Society's Global Internet survey showed that 83% of more than 10,000 internet users strongly agreed with access to the internet as a 'basic human right'.

EXTENDING THE 'BACKBONE'…

In Malaysia, Bank Negara Malaysia estimates that 8% of the population remains unbanked, effectively shutting out almost a tenth of our fellow Malaysians from our digital economy.

1.7 million Malaysian students are regarded as facing 'digital poverty' – unable to access high-speed internet connections, or own a laptop, computer or tablet. Many may recall Veveonah Mosibin, the Sabahan university student who went viral in 2020 after posting her experience of sitting for exams on a treetop to receive stable 3G network reception. Her story is one of many cases highlighting the tremendous efforts demanded from the 'digital poor' just to gain limited access to connectivity in order to meet their basic needs.

IMMENSE ECONOMIC VALUE FROM DIGITAL INCLUSIVITY

If digital access is the key to future development and wellbeing, then the fundamental ability to connect to the internet is critical for any Malaysian to be able to fruitfully participate in today's world.

As TM's core business is nationwide connectivity, we deeply appreciate the responsibility we have in playing a fundamental role in distributing this 'master key' of internet access. Although some communities may be harder to connect than others, it remains imperative that high-

speed connectivity is made accessible to every Malaysian. This will unlock the full potential of our Digital Malaysia aspirations to develop into a regional leader in the digital economy by 2030.

Massive opportunities waiting to be unlocked within Southeast Asia providing the challenge of addressing the digital divide is met. Our Malaysian government recognises this, with the aggressive rollouts of national initiatives such as Jalinan Digital Negara (JENDELA) and MyDIGITAL.

Among the latest of MyDIGITAL's initiatives to turn Malaysia into a digitally-driven regional leader, the launch of The Centre for the Fourth Industrial Revolution Malaysia (C4IR Malaysia) that marks a significant milestone in our country's priorities in fostering innovation. During the launch, Minister of Economic Affairs, Rafizi Ramli said that the launch reflects a critical insight in Malaysia's innovation journey; innovation is a team sport and collaboration is essential.

It is now apparent that our nation has prioritised digitalisation as a key strategic driver to drive our economy forward - for the benefit of all Malaysians - into a world committed to entering the 4th Industrial Revolution era.

WHAT DIGITAL INCLUSIVITY WILL BRING

Bridging the digital divide through inclusive connectivity will bring many more rewards beyond economic growth. Other rich social features bring the promise and potential of elevating our Malaysian society towards a more resilient, resourceful future.

The act of bringing high-speed connectivity to the whole of Malaysia opens up all the online information in the world into every home and office. This includes the young, eager student living in the depths of Sarawak: instead of forcing underserved students to brave the rapids to get to school, these same students can connect to knowledge and opportunities delivered straight into their hands via a smartphone or any connected device.

Powered by high-speed connectivity, digital inclusivity across Malaysia is expected to unleash the raw talent and innovative potential across our communities. Our fishermen and paddy farmers can move beyond relying on rainwater and 'old-school' machinery, to using smart agriculture solutions – enabled by the Internet of Things (IoT) – to enhance productivity and yield.

Today, the rich array of opportunities arising in connected urban communities signal the emerging era of future-ready skillsets and capabilities. This same future will be within the reach of every connected Malaysian as we extend high speed connectivity throughout the country.

Digital inclusivity is key to a sustainable, growing Digital Malaysia. Our cornerstone for truly bridging the digital divide is to level the playing field for all members of society. To help the paddy farmer produce crops more effectively, or to make knowledge accessible to every village in Eastern Malaysia; or to simply streamline daily tasks for our desk jobs – digital access is to be shared by all.

Our mission in addressing the digital divide is to open up the doors for every Malaysian to all possibilities in today's digital arena; and together build a resilient and growing Digital Malaysia.

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