

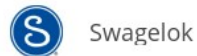
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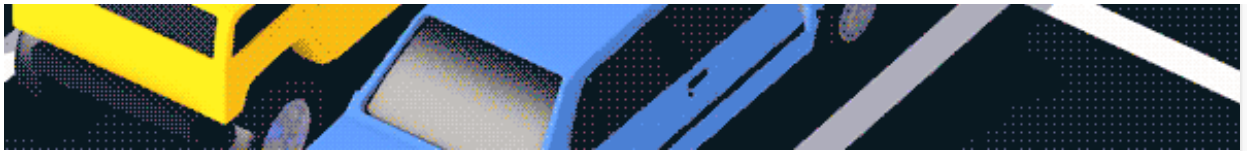


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The New York Times
On Tech
With Shira Ovide
May 5, 2020

Rural America's digital divide





Maria Chimishkyan



By Shira Ovide

Bogus maps and broken bureaucracies can have real world harm.

[Cecilia Kang](#), a Times technology reporter, wrote Tuesday about a family living outside Ithaca, N.Y., that can't get fast internet service at home — because government maps say the area already has access.

Instead, members of the family, the Derrys, drive to a country market a couple miles away, sit in their car and [hop on the store's internet hot spot](#) for Zoom classes and to send work emails.

Cecilia explained to me why tens of millions of Americans in rural areas [aren't getting fast internet at home](#), and how the pandemic has made politicians agree on the problems of the online access gap — but not on solutions.

Shira: Why can't the Derry family access internet service at home?

Cecilia: If your census area has one home with fast internet service, the government logs everyone else as having access, too, even if they don't. The Derrys only are able to buy internet service that's a throwback to the early 2000s, but one of their neighbors has the option of fast internet service.

The government's [national broadband map](#) is flawed and relieves pressure on internet providers to service families like the Derrys. Louis Derry says he has been complaining about this to the state for years.

Whose fault is this?

The internet providers are overreporting where their service reaches, and the Federal Communications Commission has allowed them to get away with it for years.

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Poor management of the Universal Service Fund, which subsidizes [phone and internet access](#) in rural areas, also has meant some companies get the money without delivering on the promised numbers of households served or service quality.

OK, play policy maker: What would fix this problem?

More accountability in the U.S.F. program is a good first step, and arguably it needs more funding.

There's a debate in Congress over whether coronavirus-related stimulus programs are an opportunity to solve rural internet gaps. With schools closed and more people working from home, Democrats and Republicans both generally agree now with the principle of getting fast internet to every American. They disagree on how.

What are their differences?

It's the classic big government versus small government debate. Democrats say more government funding to bring internet service to people like the Derry family can create the kind of jobs the economy will need. Republicans are backing a [new mobile internet technology](#) to replace home internet lines and solve access gaps.

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There were similar arguments about [electricity and phone service in the early 1900s](#). Then, the federal government decided those services were essential, and it brought electric and telephone poles to every home, no matter the cost.

The telecommunications companies will not serve the Derry family out of the goodness of their heart. There needs to be a financial incentive.

What has changed since you [wrote about gaps in internet access in 2016](#)?

The [digital divide during the pandemic](#) is changing the minds of those who didn't think this was a real problem.

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I think the stories of students being left behind because they [can't connect to virtual classes](#) will be heartbreaking and propel the internet companies and Washington to act. Here's hoping ...

We want to hear from our readers who don't have fast and reliable internet at home. How has this affected you? How do you and your family manage? Tell us at ontech@nytimes.com; please include your full name and location. We may publish a selection of responses.

Buyer (or web surfer) beware

We have to be suspicious about the motivations behind everything we see online.

That was the extremely discouraging message from the Times tech reporter [Davey Alba](#), who writes about the nasty corners of the internet.

She and [Sheera Frenkel](#) [traced the online spread of misinformation](#) that started with President Trump's mention that disinfectants and ultraviolet light might help people infected with the coronavirus.

His supporters shared videos or posts that they said supported the president's remarks, and hucksters also seized on his comments to promote their unproven or dangerous "cures."

This is a now familiar pattern. Information is almost never neutral.

People share online the ideas that conform to their political views, and people who have something to sell use tantalizing information as a business opportunity. The big internet companies like YouTube and Facebook have a tough time making and enforcing rules about what posts or videos are harmful.

It's a mess. And there's no way to fix it other than becoming more aware of the mess.

"We all have a responsibility to be vigilant about all the forces at work," Davey told me.

“That means being aware of opportunists, for-profit companies that want to protect their bottom lines and look politically neutral, and hyperpartisan followers and conspiracy theorists.”

Before we go ...

- **YouTube and one of its biggest stars make up:** The video site and the video-game-playing Swede known as PewDiePie [soured on each other](#) a few years ago after he made anti-Semitic comments. The Washington Post writes that [he's now committed to making online broadcasts only on YouTube](#), in a sign of internet companies' focus on live webcasts. And, most likely, both YouTube and PewDiePie need each other financially.
- **Knowledge of Facebook is more important than campaign experience:** With most in-person political campaigning on hold, The Verge reports that political candidates are borrowing internet stars' [attention-getting techniques](#), like hosting online sessions with celebrities and holding virtual bathtub story time.
- **Me next!** Karan Singh, a magician in India, has spent about 12 hours a day since the pandemic started [performing card tricks and feats of mentalism by online video](#) for anyone who asks. “I did it for my mental health, because I would have gone mad if I didn't have an audience to perform for,” Singh told my colleague [David Segal](#).

Hugs to this

This [postal worker interrupts and absolutely steals the show](#). (Thanks to my colleague [Erin Griffith](#) for spotting this delightful video.)

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