

The digital divide between rural and urban areas is better described as a gulf

As recent farm bills have been developed, we have heard people talk about the digital divide between urban and rural areas. While much lip service has been given to this issue, there has been a lack of concrete data on the problem or concrete proposals to reduce the digital divide between rural and urban areas.

According to MarketWatch's Capitol Report, April 9, 2021, titled "Biden's infrastructure plan seeks to solve longstanding problem with the internet, but will face familiar opposition" (<https://tinyurl.com/v3um68m7>): "President Biden's proposed \$2 trillion infrastructure plan seeks to do for the internet what it also promises to do for the nation's decaying bridges, roads, ports, airports and transit systems: Ensure safe access to necessary services.

"The "digital divide" was accentuated during the coronavirus pandemic, as children unable to connect to online classes — especially in households with brothers or sisters doing the same — were left behind. The American Jobs Plan promises roughly \$100 billion over 8 years to bring high-speed broadband to the masses, especially in rural America, which every president since Ronald Reagan has vowed to help connect to faster telecommunications services.

"The Biden administration intends to give broadband subsidies to local governments, non-profits and cooperatives, but faces resistance from an antagonist that has also promised to help close the digital divide through multiple presidential administrations: The telecommunications industry."

On June 17, 2021, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, US Department of Commerce, issued a press release (<https://tinyurl.com/8rbf9cf4>) announcing "a new publicly available digital map (<https://tinyurl.com/5y8ffkb4>) that displays key indicators of broadband needs across the country. This is the first interactive, public map that allows users to explore different datasets about where people do not have quality Internet access."

The current FCC (Federal Communications Commission) benchmark for fixed broadband service is 25Mbps (Megabits per second) download and 3 Mbps upload.

Having rural roots, the two of us thought it would be interesting to see what our internet access in the counties we once lived in would be compared to what we now have in Knoxville, TN.

Daryll grew up in Hamilton County, IA. The county has a population of 14,773 and 19.80 percent of the households are without internet access. As a whole, the county has an average download speed of 13.58 Mbps with an upload speed of 5.80 Mbps. The northern portion of the county, excluding Webster City, fares worse with 10.05 Mbps downloads and 2.11 Mbps uploads.

Harwood lived in rural counties over his career as a member of the clergy. In the Hudson/Stafford portion of Stafford County, KS 26 percent of the households are without residential internet access with an average download speed of 13.16 Mbps and 2.94 Mbps uploads.

In Pelican Rapids, Otter Tail County, MN where Harwood lived in the early 1980s, 29.2 percent of households are without internet access and the average upload speed is 28.45 Mbps with an average upload speed of 4.84 Mbps.

In Sherburn, MN where Harwood was both pastor and newspaper publisher (the roots of this column series with Daryll) 29.2 percent of the households are without internet connection with average download speed of 28.45 Mbps and upload speed of 4.84 Mbps.

We contrast these numbers in rural areas to Knoxville where we currently live to illustrate the chasm that constitutes the digital divide between rural and urban America.

In Daryll's neighborhood in Knoxville, he has access to 1,000 Mbps downloads (40 times the proposed minimum standard) and 1,000 Mbps uploads (333.33... times the proposed minimum standard). In Harwood's neighborhood further west in Knoxville he has access to 1,000 Mbps downloads and 50 Mbps uploads, though the fiber optic cable that is in the near plans for his neighborhood will give him speeds equal to those in Daryll's neighborhood.

While the proposed infrastructure will bring improved service to many rural and poor households, it needs to be seen as a first step. It will take significant long-term investment to close the rural/urban digital divide.

With regard to the opposition by the telecommunications industry, we think that given the high investment costs and low population density, internet access under the Biden plan should be limited to local governments, non-profits and cooperatives. We would hope that areas with strong rural electric cooperatives would use them as the backbone for providing rural internet access.

In Knoxville where we live, we have access to four or five competing internet providers when we consider signing up for a plan. With a small dispersed population, rural areas will in all likelihood have only one provider. To prevent monopoly pricing and service limitation, it is important that rural internet subscribers have a voice through their cooperative, local government, or non-profit provider.

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