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Limited Connection: COVID-19 Makes a Case for the Internet Becoming a Public Utility

Emma Jaber, Arts & Entertainment Editor

I was leaving the bank the other day when I heard a man behind me asking for my help. I turned around to see his outstretched arm, holding his phone towards me while he asked if I'd ever used Zoom, or if I knew how it works. He explained to me that he was late for court, that it was being held online and showed me the link in his email inbox that wasn't getting him anywhere. With the hours I have spent on Zoom in the past year, you would think I could've been more helpful, but with the limited wireless connection I noticed he had, and general technical difficulties, I couldn't get him connected to his meeting and we went our separate ways.

This got me thinking as I walked to my car. I have spent day and night glued to one screen or another as a student in the pandemic, either streaming my lectures or something to take my mind off of them. And because I haven't known a life without my own personal laptop, a privilege I think about embarrassingly less than I should, I haven't had a lot of trouble with the online transition—aside from prolonged zoom fatigue. I watched the man walk past my car, still not connected to his meeting, and thought about all those who are without internet connection, or a device that would enable one, right now when everything is internet dependent.

The reality is, without the internet as a public utility, there is no middle man to help those with no internet capabilities in a time where access is required to operate within normal societal expectations. Court dates, parole hearings, doctors appointments, the list goes on. Without a phone or adequate access to a computer, tablet etc., the roles people are expected to function in throughout this pandemic are much harder to navigate.

The expectation that everyone was ready to jump to virtual life when the pandemic started a year ago, was an unfair assumption based on the technological privileges of those who can afford their own devices. This is just another gaping hole that COVID-19 has only burrowed deeper into. People out of work right now that might not be able to afford wifi or cellular plans, homeless people that don't have places to charge devices, those sharing devices—there are so many plausible instances that would explain why so many are having similar difficulties to the man I met on the street.

Almost all pre-pandemic aspects of life are on hold right now, and with little being held in person, those already struggling are left behind in most aspects. I just hadn't thought of the internet as one of those to consider. This is not the reality for so many.

It is important that public services and community support systems are accessible to those without consistent internet. What happens when they are not guaranteed services and protections? They are pushed farther behind for no reason besides the fact that we could not at least attempt to make the internet more accessible. Yes, the information for help might be out there, but if you can't get to the information in the first place, what's the use?

The prevailing arguments against my case for making the internet a public utility all come back to regulation. Because the internet operates independently of the government, the imposition of regulations can be avoided, which is music to the ears of big business. I was only aware of the basics of internet "laws," per se, when ex-president Donald Trump attacked net neutrality, the policy that prohibits the company you are purchasing internet access from to control what or how you use the internet for, in 2019.

After the administration did away with net neutrality, I did not see a massive difference in my personal internet usage. This was one of the more unpopular decisions of the Trump administration—people love the First Amendment and know that censorship online is dangerous. I see why this could be detrimental now that we're navigating life in COVID-19. If providers want to put exorbitant costs on certain sites, censor users or only offer the news they prefer, this could be immeasurably dangerous. In a time where unbiased information is crucial to staying healthy and informed, the internet must be protected, while also ensured, for all.