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Notes from Appalachia: Stats on Rural Broadband Penetration

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By Brad King

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Unlike my esteemed boss Jason Pontin, I did not have the opportunity to go to Tahiti (for real or otherwise). Instead, I'm back in southern Ohio, at the tip of northern Appalachia, where I called home for twenty years. It's a lovely place, but there is one serious drawback: it's hard to get connected.

My cell phone has intermittent connectivity, which is a pain since my work email, my hotmail, and my SMS run through my Palm Treo 600. More importantly, though, I have a hard time finding any way to connect to the Internet while I'm here because so many of my friends and kin aren't big consumers of Internet culture.

So, I find myself sitting here in the Coffee Emporium on Erie Ave. because it's the only place I know where I can get a broadband connection. Nobody that I know has broadband, and most of the people I know who have access only have dial-up.

My friends on the coasts rarely believe things are as "bad" as I say they are, which is a pain since none of them want to actually come home with me to experience the dearth of digital culture here. (Now, don't get me wrong, I love it here and would it not be for my job, I wouldn't mind the lack of connectivity. And, for many of my friends here, they don't even know what they are "missing.")

So, I thought I'd pull up some statistics from the Pew Internet & American Life Project in April 2004:

Residents of rural areas substantially lag their urban and suburban counterparts in home broadband adoption. Just 10 percent of Americans who live in rural areas have broadband

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with rural people less likely than others to use the Internet to begin with (by a 47 percent to 67 percent margin in February 2004).

Some of this gap is attributable to lack of availability of broadband infrastructure. When dial-up users who live in rural areas were asked whether high-speed Internet service to the home is available where they live, 27 percent said it was not, 38 percent said it was available, and 35 percent didn't know. Among non-rural residents, only 11 percent of dial-up users say broadband is not available where they live, 64 percent say it is, and 24 percent do not know.

Rural Americans have demographic characteristics that make it less likely for them to have broadband connections; on average, rural dwellers are older, less educated, and not as wealthy as their non-rural counterparts. However, the large gaps in self-reported availability of broadband connections suggest that lack of high-speed infrastructure has something to do with lower home broadband use in rural areas.

by Brad King



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