

The Daily Dot

Disconnected in Silicon Valley's shadow

Rebecca Huval — Aug 14 at 9:51AM



While Facebook looks to bring internet access to India, many in nearby Fresno struggle with digital literacy.

Just two hours outside of futuristic Silicon Valley, the county of Fresno, California, looks like a time capsule from the 1970s. Beyond the prom dress shops with their cartoonish window paintings, the vacant lots, and the brutalist AT&T building that seems to lack windows, you'll find the Parc Grove Commons housing projects. Inside the community room, 45 adult students are learning about the internet. On this sunny summertime Thursday, every single student has shown up to class.

Today, they're learning about email. "Instead of putting mail in an envelope and waiting a couple of days, you can send a message instantly," explains the teacher, John Gonzalez. An older student responds with delight: "Ooooooh." At the end of the nine-week class—organized by the Fresno Housing Authority and California State University (CSU), Fresno's Office of Community & Economic Development—students with perfect attendance will earn an HP laptop.

Racheale Mitchell, who lives in the apartments, is attending because she had once lost a job offer as a result of her limited access to the internet. The 28-year-old had been driving 10 minutes to her cousin's house to use his computer. Sometimes, she would drive to the library,

but she was often given a numbered ticket and told to wait. Since then, she's landed a job with the public school district working as an attendance clerk, and she wants to be able to update students' files from home.

"[The internet] should be a right for everyone," Mitchell says. "You can't even go into a store and fill out a job application anyone. They say: 'We'll email you back for the interview.'"

Other students complained that they're struggling to sign up for social security, Medicare, driver's license renewals, and student loan payments. The list goes on. Those governmental services have migrated online. "Now you can't even make a phone call to do your unemployment insurance; you have to do it online," Gonzalez says. "As more of the government agencies move in that direction, they're leaving behind a lot of people behind who don't have internet at home."

With an unemployment rate that hovers around [10 percent](#), the cause of Fresno's doldrums can be linked to the tools of Silicon Valley's own success: Only [69 percent](#) of the Fresno metro population uses the internet. The city is barely better off than the two least connected California metros, Bakersfield and Hanford, both of which are also in Central Valley.

As powerful tech companies like Facebook strive to bring greater internet access to other parts of the world, are they overlooking the digital divide in their own backyard?

The connectivity gap at home

The reasons for the low internet usage in Fresno are complex and intertwined. The poverty rate —[28 percent](#)—is much higher than in other California cities, meaning that many households are unable to afford either a computer or a costly monthly subscription to the internet. As a result, there's a lack of digital literacy, which is what draws so many students to CSU Fresno's digital literacy classes (more than 500 total in just the Spring 2016 semester).

On top of all these factors, the large internet service providers (ISPs), such as [Comcast](#) and [AT&T](#), struggle to make a return on their investment in certain underserved areas, given the lack of customer base, says Gladys Palpallatoc, associate vice president of the California Emerging Technology Fund. Not to mention, those broadband and fiber-optic cables are cumbersome infrastructure to build from scratch.

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In a public relations move, both Comcast and AT&T have launched subscriptions for low-income households—[Internet Essentials](#) and [AT&T Access](#), respectively—but both have limitations. AT&T only just launched its program in April, offering service to households in its 21-state service area where at least one resident is enrolled in the U.S. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or receives California’s Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits.

The Comcast program, at \$9.95 a month (for families with at least one child who qualifies for free and reduced lunch), is affordable, but it doesn’t cover low-income seniors and people without children. Comcast is expanding the eligibility in certain trial areas. Just this July, the company and U.S. HUD announced [ConnectHome](#) to make people living in housing assistance eligible for Internet Essentials. Fresno is one of its priority areas, but the program won’t help residents outside of public housing in Fresno County’s sprawling, isolated patches.

Even qualified people sometimes struggle to sign up for it.

“[Comcast] is really hard to get ahold of,” says Gonzalez, whose office coordinates three-way calls between low-income customers and the ISP because some of his Internet Essential-qualified students have been asked to subscribe at the market rate. People without the internet often call the first phone number they can find, which is commonly Comcast’s general line instead of the Internet Essentials phone number, he says. “They’re a business, so of course they’re trying to make money, and sometimes these participants feel like they have to sign up for all the extras, and we’re there on the phone making sure everything goes as it should.” In the last three years, his office at CSU Fresno has facilitated 2,320 new broadband subscriptions.

The California government almost stepped up to improve the situation. This past April, a state [bill](#), known as the “Internet for All Act,” was poised to collect [\\$350 million](#) in funds to support what ISPs are unwilling or unable to do: Build the infrastructure to bring broadband into rural and underserved areas. Then, AT&T’s lobbyists pushed for a new, competing [bill](#) that would have given the company first dibs on areas with new broadband infrastructure. In the end, the author killed both proposals over a lack of support.

Though smaller ISPs are the ones that stand to make a return on their investments in sparsely populated areas, bigger ISPs don’t want them to encroach on their territory, Palpallatoc says. “The incumbents would rather not open up that opportunity—but when given the opportunity, they can’t do it, so it’s this tug of war. It’s mirrored in ubiquitous utilities over time. There’s

always a subsidy and an incumbent. A government entity has to step in to make sure their citizenship gets the services necessary.”

Even though the U.N. declared internet a basic human right in [2011](#), some lawmakers in the United States are still uncomfortable with the idea. California assemblymember Mike Gatto opposed the Internet for All Act. “Some proposals involve bringing connectivity to mountain cabins, where vacationers probably prefer to unplug,” he [wrote](#) in the *Sacramento Bee*. Likewise, the *Orange County Register* editorial staff [wrote](#) in May: “High-speed Internet is a service and a convenience, not a fundamental right. It is not, and should not, be an entitlement. Moreover, it is already available in libraries, Internet cafes and businesses that offer free WiFi access.”

About that: On the same Thursday of the digital literacy class, around lunchtime, the Fresno Central Library’s 45 computers with internet were all occupied. Only two screens were opened to [Facebook](#). The rest of the visitors were applying to jobs—at Michael’s, at restaurants, at malls—filling for federal student aid, browsing Fresno City College’s schedule of classes, or researching how to grow plants at home.

Among them, Anthonia Washington, a farmer in northwest Fresno and a civil rights activist, was emailing an advocacy group to spread the word about abuses in Fresno prisons. Without a computer or high-speed internet at home, she goes to the library almost daily, she says. About half the time, she has to wait to use the computers—sometimes as long as two hours. As an advocate, she’s helped her low-income neighbors and friends of friends to contest foreclosures and credit issues because they don’t have the internet at home, either.

“You’re denied your right to due process by virtue of whether you have access to the internet,” Washington says. “If you can’t afford it, you’re shunted from civil process. You’re supposed to have the right to file a foreclosure. So if you have those rights, but the only way to afford it is to go on the internet, you’re actually denied that right. That’s a whole avenue of civil process that’s denied to you. A lot of the people I talk to speak as though they don’t have a right to participate in society because they’re so used to having that door slammed in their face because they’re being told, ‘Oh, it’s on the internet.’”

Bridging the digital divide

Meanwhile, in San Francisco and San Jose, tech workers dine on gourmet bacon-wrapped figs stuffed with goat cheese. The figs were likely grown in Fresno, as are 350 other types of produce. Though Central Valley harvests most of the country’s crops, tech workers often forget

their neighboring region exists. In the Bay Area map according to Urban Dictionary, the Central Valley is jokingly referred to as "[unknown parts](#)."

Though Facebook has [tried to force](#) the internet upon India with Free Basics, no large tech company has sought to improve connectivity in Fresno. "Their philanthropy dollars go abroad," Palpallatoc says. "They look at the digital divide issue abroad because they think it's their new market. They don't look here. ... The focus of this new tech money tends to be very narrow."

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Even Google Fiber's Digital Inclusion Fellowship, which seeks to close the digital divide by partnering with local organizations, chose San Francisco as a partner city over Fresno. "Being in its second year, [the fellowship is] still growing," says Samantha Akwei, the chosen Digital Inclusion Fellow in San Francisco. "Being in San Francisco is a big thing. But it should also be in Oakland and Walnut Creek and Central Valley. Part of what the fellowship is built to do is ask those questions and shine light."

Though the tech industry and the ISPs have the money and the technical connections, it isn't up to those parties alone to get everyone on the internet, says Kish Rajan, chief evangelist for [Cal Innovates](#), an advocacy group that links the high-tech industry with public policymakers in California. "It has to be a collaboration between the public sector and the private sector," he says. "No one party is responsible. The service providers have a big role in making broadband services accessible affordable and usable so that its usage can grow. At the same time, you have to look at the government creating the regulatory condition that will enable businesses to make rational investments. We can't expect businesses to invest for public good."

The nerve center of Fresno's own tech community is small but growing. [Bitwise Industries](#), which houses 107 companies and a tech academy, was founded by Irma Olguin Jr., who grew up in Caruthers, just outside Fresno, without internet. The day she wrote her first email was her first day of college. In her wildest visions for her company, Bitwise will help fund a train throughout Fresno's isolated, disconnected sprawl. "It's because 10-year-old Irma wants to get on a train and take a robotics class," she says. "If we can expose young people to that opportunity to learn about tech and engineering, they're going to build their own tower and ISP."

Until then, the next Irma Olguin is boarding an hour-long bus to the library—to wait for the internet for another two hours.