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Fanning Innovation's Flame

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I recently spent 10 days visiting my mother; that's a nice thing for a son to do. But I felt as if I'd fallen off the edge of the earth. Let me explain.

Regardless of my subtle (and not so subtle) "suggestions" over the years, my mother has remained computer-free. Neither the benefits of keeping in easy touch with her friends and relatives, nor the ability to videoconference with her grandchildren, nor a world's worth of recipes and other Web information, has motivated her to accept one of the many computers that I've offered to send her way.

She's happy gaining her information from the newspaper and TV, and an excellent cell phone plan is helping her to (slowly) give up her entrenched "*long distance is terribly expensive - we use an egg timer to limit the Sunday morning call to Grandma to three minutes*" mantra from decades past. Needless to say a cable modem has never crossed her threshold.

I knew all this as I planned my trip; I knew the information-starved environment that I was heading into. But-I-had-a-plan.

The Best Laid Plans...

My mom lives in the center of a very large city, about twenty floors in the sky. So I was sure that my WiFi-equipped notebook would have little trouble piggybacking on one of the many open WiFi networks that I was sure would surround me.

I was wrong. Even though I was staring out the window at hundreds (thousands?) of other apartments, plus a large swath of private homes, only an occasional and far too weak to use signal titillated my notebook. In the heart of a major city I was cut off from a world of information.

But I was on vacation; I didn't plan on necessarily keeping up with my Email. I didn't have any must-do research in front of me. So I assuaged myself with the thought that the lack of an Internet connection wouldn't really be missed.

Wrong again.

It's Woven Into The Fabric...

One of my plans for this visit was to take my mom to a wide diversity of restaurants, so out came the paper Yellow Pages. But wait a minute -- which restaurants were good? Tap as I might against the yellow paper, it wouldn't reveal even one, much less thousands of restaurant reviews! How's a person to sift the restaurant wheat from the chaff? (Sorry.)

(Happily I still came up with some excellent choices. But it was sheer chance...)

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Well fed, it was now time for various "fix it" tasks around the house. One of them was replacing a damaged external door knob. Of course this wasn't just *any* door knob, and the replacement had to be very similar. This wasn't a hardware store type of knob, so we burned dead dinosaurs to drive across town to a specialty store that my mom knew about. Of course they didn't have a suitable replacement, and they couldn't tell me where I might find one. Where was the Web when I needed it!?! I couldn't browse the many doorknob catalogs that I know were there for the keystroking. Was this any way to accomplish a task?

Then I had to replace the battery in her cordless phone -- but what retailer carried this specific model? The newspaper and the Yellow Pages remained mute.

One evening I thought that a movie would be a good idea; she hadn't been out to see one for a long time. Here, the newspaper was actually helpful, listing which movies were playing where. But I didn't know where the theaters were located in relation to her house; I'd been spoiled by Web-based movie sites that provide such information as a matter of course. And the newspaper couldn't provide the plethora of critic and user movie reviews that I'd grown to expect a click away.

Arrrgggg! Even though I wasn't "working," the loss of the myriad incidental Internet-based services that have silently woven themselves into my everyday life was having a surprisingly significant impact on my activities. This had to stop. I needed my information fix. I was getting desperate.

But my choices were very limited. Yes, I could have ordered up either DSL or cable modem service, but given the time and fees it takes to get either installed, and the minimum service commitment, this wasn't viable for my short visit. Which left me staring an old nemesis in the face -- dial-up.

I used to have a dial-up account, of course. I even kept it for many years after I had broadband Internet at my home and office because early broadband was (let me be charitable here) occasionally intermittent, and back then it was a rare hotel that provided Internet access at a reasonable price. Finally though, a year or so ago, I realized just how long it had been since I'd needed that dial-up account and so I figuratively and literally cut the cord.

Where's That Coaster When You Need It?

But not to worry - I could sign up for a new dial-up account with a large national provider like AOL with little effort. After all, I remember the flood of AOL "coasters," and one of them would re-introduce my notebook to the telephone system with ease. But I couldn't find one. And without such a disk, I couldn't sign up for a service because I needed the requisite application, and I couldn't download the application until I had some network access! (The days of using simple, built-in dial-up access that worked with any ISP seem to have left the lexicon of the large national services.) The 'ol 'chicken and egg' thing. Catch-22.

I was delivered from this quandary by a relative when I visited for a most excellent dinner (thanks Ellie!) and "borrowed" a bit of bandwidth to download the AOL application. I was soon back in touch with the world over a phone line.

And you know, after my info-deprivation I found that dial-up wasn't nearly as bad as I'd remembered! It's amazing how my standards relaxed in the face of no other alternative -- it was much better to wait a minute for a Web page to load than for it not to load at all.

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It's Now The "U" Word.

My trip was saved. Regardless of forcing my mom's phone line to exercise itself to a degree never seen before, I was back in touch with the world. I could find doorknobs. I knew which movie theater was closest. I was more informed for my next restaurant choices. And so much more that I didn't know I'd miss was again, albeit slowly, at my fingertips. I felt that I had reentered the 21st century. I felt "whole" again.

OK, perhaps that's a bit of hyperbole, but it's not too far from the truth. I realized just how much the Internet had become embedded in my life. I missed my expanded information universe. I found it harder to interact with the day to day world. It was akin to living without electricity, running water, or other things that we simply take for granted.

In effect, the Internet has become the next "Utility." Yet this utility was not grown by a monopoly. Its very lack of regulation is precisely why it has fostered the rapid and drastic innovations that have already, significantly, changed how we work, live, and play. These changes could never have been "regulated" into existence. And these trends are already having a major effect ON those old regulated utilities -- consider how VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) phone service has lowered the price for both local and global phone calls. And new companies, such as Google, seem to be rushing to further fill that demand while [generating new ones](#).

Fanning The Flame.

As the Internet becomes a Utility for an increasing percentage of the population, let's not forget just how and why it has become so valuable. Let's be careful not to legislate away its innovation and its value. The social and economic benefits that the Internet has already conferred have proven how unregulated innovation is a wonderful thing, to be cherished and nurtured. As the Internet continues to improve and mature, we will reap a continuing stream of new benefits that are as inconceivable today, as pervasive personal and business Email and Web usage were a decade ago. And the new services, too, will become enshrined in our personal and business daily lives.

I wonder if my mom would like a cable modem for her birthday...

Don't Blink!

This essay is original and was specifically prepared for publication at Future Brief. A brief biography of Jeff Harrow can be found at our main [Commentary](#) page. Other essays written by Jeff Harrow can be found at his [web site](#). Jeff receives e-mail at jeff@theharrowgroup.com. Other websites are welcome to link to this essay, with proper credit given to Future Brief and Mr. Harrow. This page will remain posted on the Internet indefinitely at this web address to provide a stable page for those linking to it.

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