

PUBLIC INTEREST TECHNOLOGY

The internet: public or private? #PublicInterestTech

Internet access is an indispensable factor when it comes to opportunities and resources. Susan Crawford, author and Harvard Law professor, reflects on the monopoly big companies hold over the service, quality and availability of fiber optic internet service. She points out that with little to no government regulatory infrastructure, or representatives with the necessary know-how, provider incentives rarely align with the public's best interest.

Technology is transforming every area of our lives. But as it opens new avenues and shows us fresh possibilities, tech can also deepen existing inequalities. We believe in harnessing technology to serve justice and the public interest—and we see a wealth of opportunities to do so. That's why the Ford Foundation is working with a community of partners to develop a path for people to use their technology skills to change the world for the better: the professional field of public interest technology.

Transcript begins.

Susan Crawford: We have this unquestioning faith that the market will always provide. It turns out, we've gotten ourselves to a point where we are leaving behind tens of millions of Americans, and actually our entire country is suffering from a digital divide between us and countries in Asia and in Northern Europe. It's a tragedy.

[Susan Crawford, John A. Reilly Clinical Professor, Harvard Law School. A white woman wearing a black cardigan over a white collared shirt.]

Okay. Public interest technology—take one. I've been very interested in the public-private line throughout my career. I had a grad student say to me the other day, "Well, couldn't the private sector do whatever government does and just do it better?" And my fear is that we've lost the idea that government actually helps people have better lives. And particularly when it comes to Internet access, the entire idea of having some regulatory role for government seems to have disappeared from the scene.

[Animation showing a document titled "Internet Bill of Rights", the document is ripped in half, and money flows towards a tall building representing an internet provider.]

In order to fix this, we need to make sure that there are people serving in government who understand that, left to its own devices, the private market is never going to provide us with this indispensable thing for our lives, which is persistent, cheap, ubiquitous fiber optic internet access everywhere we are.

[Animated fiber optic cables slither across the screen.]

We can't afford to have the country in this position where these five giant players have essentially divided up the high-speed internet access market among themselves, leaving people with very few choices and extremely expensive and extremely second-class service.

[Animation of an outline of the United States, with the major internet provider names and logos for CenturyLink, Spectrum, Verizon, AT&T, and Comcast stamped over all of the states.]

Their incentives aren't aligned with public incentives. We faced the same battle with both electricity and highways. It took Franklin Delano Roosevelt and tremendous national leadership to ensure that electricity reached everyone in the country. It took Eisenhower, in 1952, to ensure that highways reached across the country. This doesn't happen absent government involvement. We've known this for the railroad, electricity, water, telephone, and highways. These same principles apply to high-speed Internet access. Other countries get this. There's a hundred percent fiber availability at very low prices in Japan, South Korea, Sweden, Norway. We don't have that here and it's because we've had no industrial policy of ensuring an upgrade to fiber and making it available at a reasonable cost. We need people at the table who both understand deeply the role of government and what the regulatory ideal is, and also understand technology—and can't be bamboozled by the blandishments of AT&T and Verizon and Comcast and Spectrum, who keep saying, "Don't worry, just trust us. We'll fix this for you."

[This is tech at work for the public! Hashtag Public Interest Tech. Ford Foundation dot org forward slash tech. Ford Foundation logo: a globe made up of a series of small, varied circles.]

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End of transcript.