The Digital Divide: A Quarter of the Nation Is Without Broadband

By **KARL VICK** March 30, 2017

Appalachia is not what it used to be. Hunger no longer stalks the hollows and ridges of a region once emblematic of American poverty, and no one lacks electricity. "Except for that one guy who comes in for car batteries," says Tim Groves, from behind the counter at Advance Auto Parts in Woodsfield, Ohio. "That's because he doesn't want electricity," explains Jason Covert, the store manager. "He wants to be off the grid."

So, progress. Yet when it comes to the Internet, the region remains as backward and stunted as its stereotype. Decades into the information age, folks in these parts continue to make do with dial-up.

Across much of America, a generation has come of age without even once hearing the stutter, squeal and shhhhhh of a home computer's modem shaking hands with an Internet server. In Woodsfield—and hundreds of thousands of other overlooked pockets of the nation—there are people who have never heard anything else. "Hell, it's barely fast enough to check your email," says Covert. "You hit the button and you wait five minutes. Then you hit it again and get a snack ..."

America's digital divide is not only a matter of geography. Among the quarter of Americans without broadband—basically, a connection fast enough to stream video—are many who simply cannot afford the monthly bill for service. Less than half of households living on under $20,000 are connected. The collective deficit in opportunity, education and prospects—everything implied in "being connected"—further separates us into haves and have-nots.

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