



Citizen Political Enfranchisement and Information Access: Telecommunications Services in Rural and Remote Areas

This research was assisted by a grant from the Necessary Knowledge for a Democratic Public Sphere Program of the Social Science Research Council with funds provided by the Ford Foundation.

By some measures, access to electronic media in Montana is on par with the rest of the nation. Statewide data regarding high-speed Internet penetration is comparable to the national penetration level, and Montana' citizens have other means of information access including wireless hot spots, schools and libraries equipped with Internet, locally owned low power FM stations and municipal web sites. ***However, statewide averages are misleading.*** A more careful examination of the data, using county wide and local information where available, reveals several significant patterns and gaps:

- Montana's more metropolitan areas are experiencing significant population and economic growth, and much of the growth in information access and on-line services is centered in these areas. The rural and remote regions of the state are underserved and falling behind.
- Online services in Montana are uneven. While about two thirds of the counties have web sites, the services offered in the rural areas are not comparable to those available in the metro areas, and well behind national levels. Many of the rural county web sites are sponsored by business interests such as tourist agencies, chambers of commerce or real estate interests. These sites offer little in the way of transactional services that would enable citizen engagement in government.
- The results of our examination of county web sites show that the rural county web sites offer online services in less than 50% of the categories defined in a national county and local municipality e-government assessment.
- Even in Montana's metro counties, there are six of the twenty service categories where none of the counties offer the service online.
- Internet access in Montana is costly - above the national averages for all categories of service
- Services that would offer alternatives to costly travel, such as streaming video, document retrieval, filings and registrations are available in Montana on an extremely limited basis. With energy and travel costs rising, expanded e-government services could be a valuable investment.
- The aging demographics and population distribution also are reflected in the trends in electronic media access.
 - Internet services are less available in the areas with older and declining populations, and other electronic media, such as low power FM and TV coverage are very limited in these same areas.

- Similarly, these areas are not being served by wireless hot spots or community networks, which are much more prevalent in the more metro parts of the state, which are characterized by population growth and lower median age.

The universal service fund has made a significant impact on the availability of telecommunications services in rural areas. As noted above, the investments in internet access for schools and libraries has, on a per capita basis, favored the less populated areas of the state. While universal service fund expenditures for internet access for schools and libraries have been higher on a per capita basis in the rural areas of the state, the benefit to the general population is limited. Universal service fund expenditures for individuals are restricted to providing only basic voice telephone service for high cost areas or for low income users. These funds cannot be used to provide high speed internet service for individuals.

Unlike the local exchange telephone carriers, who are monitored and regulated by the state Public Service Commission (PSC) in Montana, the cable network operators are not subject to state oversight. While the local exchange carriers are eligible for universal service funds and the cable network operators are not, this lack of oversight makes it difficult to determine the extent to which cable-based internet service is reaching rural and remote areas. The cable operators have a presence in 70% of Montana's counties, but it is not possible to determine how many subscribers are served, and whether these subscribers are clustered in the most densely populated areas or widely dispersed.

Recommendations:

- That an in-depth study of rural internet penetration be undertaken to more carefully identify and quantify the availability of high-speed services. Specifically, the FCC should collect data at the census tract level instead of zip code level,
- That universal service funds be extended to include provision of high-speed internet service to high cost areas and to support low-income citizens,
- That the Montana information technology plan be extended to include standards for local government web site and interactive services, and that resources be allocated to enable rural localities to implement these services.

To view the full study, go to: <http://www.commoncause.org/MT/EGovernanceStudy>

Common Cause works to strengthen public participation and faith in our institutions of self-government; to ensure that government and political processes serve the general interest, rather than special interests; to curb the excessive influence of money on government decisions and elections; to promote fair elections and high ethical standards for government officials; and to protect the civil rights and civil liberties of all Americans.

www.commoncause.org