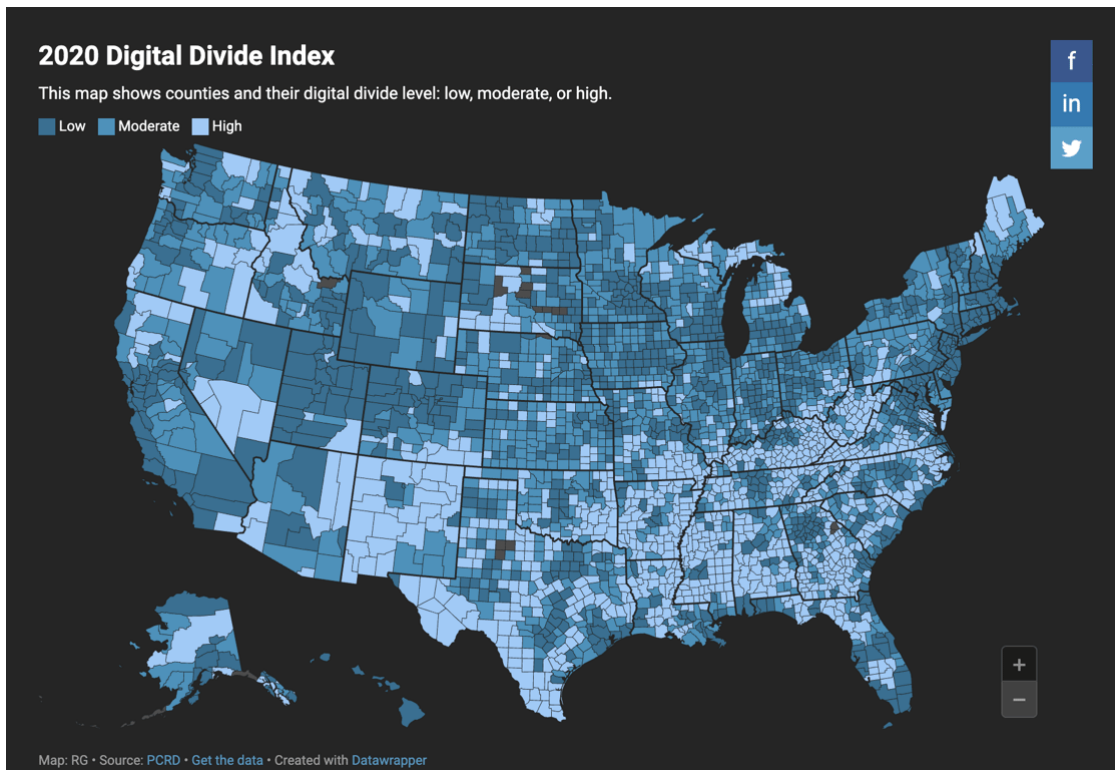# UNFIN'SHED ''

October 21, 2022

Welcome back to the Unfinished newsletter, where we explore the intersection of tech, ethics, and social impact.

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2020 Digital Divide Index
This map shows counties and their digital divide level: low, moderate, or high.

■ Low ■ Moderate ■ High

Map: RG • Source: PCRD • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

What we're thinking about

This newsletter has explored nearly every dimension of our online lives, highlighting the biggest issues and the brightest minds as we pave the way for the future. And we've talked about our moonshot initiative, **Project Liberty**, that will transform how the internet works, who owns and controls personal data, and who benefits from the digital economy. But what happens when large swaths of the population can't even get online? When millions of people

struggle to log on or pay an internet bill, what does it mean for an economy that is increasingly becoming digital and a civic discourse that is increasingly found in online spaces?

This week we're using this digital newsletter sent to your digital inbox to explore the digital divide. The irony is not lost on us, but it's a topic that deserves attention, even for those of us engaging with this newsletter via an affordable broadband connection. Just be grateful we're not asking you to buy Meta's new $1,500 VR headset to read this (more on the metaverse digital divide later).

What is the digital divide?
The digital divide refers to the gap between those who have access to broadband internet, and those who do not. While **93% of American adults** use the internet and three-quarters of American adults have access to broadband at home, **42 million Americans, including one out of every three K-12 students**, do not have access to broadband.

As you might expect, the digital divide cleaves our country along the lines of geography, age, race, and socioeconomic status. It is greatest between the elderly and the young, those in rural areas and those in cities, and between low-income and high-income earners. Those most cut off from the internet tend to be rural, veterans, living in poverty, and/or disabled. Of the counties in the US with the highest digital divide, **only 17% were urban** (check out **this interactive map** to find your county).

For students, lack of access to broadband internet can turn into an entirely different academic and career trajectory. During the COVID pandemic when students were forced to learn from home by relying on their household internet service, educators began to observe a "**homework gap**" between students from low-income households that are less likely to have broadband access and their more connected peers.

The biggest contributor to the digital divide is cost. **Half of Americans** who are not connected to high-speed internet at home say it's because they can't afford the monthly payment. **Sixty percent of disconnected K-12 students**, particularly Black and urban students, are unable to afford internet service.

One nation, indivisible
But there is good news. The combination of growing awareness about the digital divide, increased political will, local partnerships, and improved technology means that major progress is within reach.

For example, at Unfinished we are supporting our Network Partner **Heartland Forward** on its **Connecting the Heartland** initiative to pilot and scale digital education and equity programs in low-income and rural communities where the need for this investment is most urgent.

Angie Cooper, Chief Programs Officer of Heartland Forward said: "The US Census Bureau reports that just 85% of households have an internet subscription. That means there are millions of people across the heartland and the country that don't have access to a basic utility that allows them to fully participate in modern society. That's part of why Heartland Forward created Connecting the Heartland: to advocate for funding and policies — as well as develop high-touch person-to-person programs — that ensure all people have access to high-speed internet, no matter where they live, how old they are or their income level. Bridging the digital divide is essential to truly having an equitable country."

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) and the American Rescue Plan Act **have allocated $100 billion** to help states bring high-speed internet access to every American household, which represents the largest public investments in connectivity since the creation of the Interstate Highway System over 60 years ago.

Since the pandemic began, Congress has also created the **Emergency Broadband Benefit** Program (EBB) that helps households struggling to access the internet. Eligible participants receive a $30 a month discount toward their internet service, with households on qualifying Tribal lands receiving a discount of up to $75 per month. This year, Biden announced the **Affordable Connectivity Program**, which provides high-quality internet at no cost to qualified households.

Improved technology is also **driving costs down while improving internet quality**. Satellite internet (similar to satellite TV) is expanding access into rural areas, and 5G home internet plans are starting to be offered by mobile carriers like Verizon and T-Mobile with strong download speeds.

The existence of high-speed internet only begets greater demand for high-speed internet. The bandwidth requirements for web1 were less than those requirements for web2, and as the internet embraces digital currencies, digital economies, and virtual worlds, not only will we be demanding faster and faster connections, but we'll also be demanding new types of technologies like Meta's new VR headset that will reshape our understanding of how we show up online.

It has us curious if the greatest digital divide is still ahead: a divide (or maybe a spectrum) between those who have chosen to increasingly live out their lives online by immersing themselves in digital worlds, and those who are trying to (or are forced to) find a balance between their physical existence and their digital identities.

🗞️ Other notable headlines

🤖 Noema Magazine explores the exploited labor behind today's AI systems in a **recent article**. Armies of underpaid workers in emerging markets around the

world are powering current AI systems by performing repetitive tasks in precarious conditions. For machine learning models to work, they require large amounts of data that are labeled, and it is often humans who complete these repetitive labeling tasks under constant surveillance. The labor conditions for low-income workers building AI systems represent a largely unexplored frontier in the field of ethical AI.

💵 **The Markup** found that four internet providers (AT&T, Verizon, Earthlink, and CenturyLink) have offered slower speeds in poor neighborhoods at the same price as faster speeds in wealthier neighborhoods. In 38 cities across the United States, providers charged the same price for 200 Mbps internet in wealthier and whiter neighborhoods as they did for 25 Mbps internet in poorer neighborhoods with more minorities. Addresses in historically redlined neighborhoods were offered worse deals twice as often as weather zip codes.

🕶️ Meta's new virtual reality headset, the Meta Quest Pro, includes an "Eye Tracking Privacy Notice" that notifies users that Meta will use eye-tracking data to "help Meta personalize your experiences and improve Meta Quest." Personalizing your experience is often a euphemism for customized, targeted ads, according to an **article from Gizmodo**, but we don't need to read between the lines to understand Meta's intentions. Its Head of Global Affairs Nick Clegg said that eye tracking data could be used "in order to understand whether people engage with an advertisement or not." Ray Walsh, a digital privacy researcher at ProPrivacy, said, "When you can literally see a person look at an ad for a watch, glance for ten seconds, smile, and ponder whether they can afford it, that's providing more information than ever before."

🔮 With advances in AI and voice technology, we've entered the era of being able to talk to our dead relatives. **MIT Technology Review** explores the appeal, the risks, and the awkwardness. There is undeniable appeal in remaining connected to lost loved ones, but others find this technology creepy or even unhealthy and triggering for the grieving process. There are also ethical implications if the person never provided consent, or if they're not even dead (imagine if someone built an AI bot of you, without you knowing). To generate a digital replica of a person, you need a lot of data to feed the AI algorithms. While some startups are more focused on preserving someone's life story than being able to have an interactive conversation with them, others are going further by uploading someone's text messages, emails, and voice conversations to create a bot companion of someone who has passed away.

🧭 People are resorting to using Apple Airtags to track loved ones with dementia. At $29, Airtags are cheaper than other tracking devices, and because they're usually on a keychain or in a wallet, they're less likely to be left behind. But as the *Wall Street Journal* reports, tracking people with Airtags is ethically questionable if people haven't consented to be tracked (not to mention when **Apple's Airtags have been used to stalk people**). But in the case of caregivers for people with dementia, they can be a useful tool to prevent wandering and improve care.

🗣️ Unfinished Network Partner News

Unfinished Network Partner **Internet Archive** launched **Democracy's Library**, a free, open, and accessible compendium of publications and research from governments around the world–unleashing this vital information from paywalls.

"Democracy's Library is a stepping stone toward citizens who are more empowered and more engaged," said Internet Archive's Founder Brewster Kahle, who is spearheading the effort.

Here you can watch Brewster's short talk on Democracy's Library at Unfinished Live.

Thank you for reading.

Follow Unfinished (**@byUnfinished** on Twitter and **@thisisunfinished** on IG) for ongoing chitchat on the changing web.

Have a great, restful weekend.

The Unfinished team