Why it matters to startups:

Thanks to the Internet, an entrepreneur located anywhere in the country should be able to launch and grow a company that reaches users across the world. But entire communities are currently excluded from participating in the startup ecosystem—including as startup founders and employees as well as users—because they don't have sufficient ability to get online. Increasing reliable and affordable broadband access through wireless and wireline connectivity, devices, and digital literacy resources creates more opportunities for innovation and entrepreneurship.

Key takeaways:

- Startups need policymakers at all levels of government to prioritize more reliable, affordable, and accessible broadband in all communities across the country.

- The startup ecosystem is benefited when more people have the digital literacy tools and resources to get online.

- Policymakers need resources and accurate data to advance broadband access and digital literacy in an equitable way.

Startups also need telecommunications policy that ensures a level playing field where new and innovative companies can compete against large incumbents with deep pockets. This includes through net neutrality protections—which ensure Internet service providers don't block or throttle the users trying to reach startups' services or charge startups for better access to their users—and through balanced spectrum policy that preserves unlicensed spectrum—the shared airwaves that fuel Wi-Fi networks and Bluetooth technology—for use by all.

What policymakers can do:

Policymakers should continue working to improve broadband access across the country by pushing ISPs to build out broadband access in underserved areas. Early in the pandemic, when Internet access became even more critical, Congress passed a handful of bills aimed at closing the digital divide. The National Telecommunications and Information Administration is now working on administering the billions of dollars set aside. As they continue their work to close the digital divide, policymakers need accurate data about which communities lack sufficient broadband access. They also need to invest in efforts to get the necessary tools and resources to communities that aren't able to participate in the innovation ecosystem due to a lack of digital literacy. Those efforts should be targeted at the underserved communities that currently lack the necessary knowledge and equipment.

Policymakers should also advance balanced spectrum policy that makes unused spectrum available for unlicensed use, and they should reinstate strong net neutrality protections to ensure that the Internet is a level playing field. Both of those issues tend to be dominated by large, incumbent voices in policy debates, but policymakers should actively seek out and consider the startup perspective.

Startup Spotlight

Ecobot
(Asheville, NC)
Lee Lance, Co-founder & CEO

Ecobot is a platform to streamline data collection in fieldwork.

"Very often, there is no data coverage in areas of new development. So if our customer is working on a month-long pipeline project in southern Alabama, for example, even when they get back to their hotel, they're likely still lacking good coverage. We know that widespread broadband needs to catch up with innovation."