CONNECTIVITY

What is connectivity policy?

Connectivity is the ability to get online, facilitated by broadband access. Much of the work the federal government does to improve broadband access has to do with wireline broadband, or the cables in the ground connecting homes, office buildings, etc. The government has several programs to encourage wireline broadband buildout and adoption, typically for underserved communities, such as rural areas or low-income communities. The federal government also controls who can offer Internet access via spectrum. Unlicensed spectrum is the airwaves that are open for use by anyone, including ones that power WiFi networks and connective devices. Net neutrality ensures that Internet Service Providers (ISPs) treat all lawful Internet traffic the same, meaning they can't block or slow access to websites or online services, or charge websites for better, faster access to users.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- With a good idea and a reliable, affordable connection to the open Internet, a startup of any size, anywhere in the country can launch and grow a global business.
- Startups need policymakers at all levels to prioritize reliable and affordable broadband to ensure the startup ecosystem remains accessible to all.
- Net neutrality is crucial for startups and provides a level playing field on the Internet. Without net neutrality protections, ISPs can block, throttle, or charge more to prioritize certain Internet traffic.

Why does it matter to startups?

With a connection to the open Internet, an entrepreneur located anywhere in the country can create and grow a company that reaches users across the world. As broadband access increases and improves, so too does the opportunity for innovation. Additionally, the availability of unlicensed spectrum has created opportunities for companies that make and use technology that relies on high-frequency airwaves for wireless device-to-device communications, like Bluetooth speakers or autonomous vehicles.

Net neutrality is what keeps the Internet a level playing field, and these protections are especially critical to startups. Without net neutrality, startups that have an innovative product or service that competes with big companies have to worry about paying to have their websites or services load as fast as those of their competitors.

Where are we now?

The federal government is constantly working to improve access to broadband across the country, including increasing the amount of spectrum available for use by the public, providing incentives for companies to build out wired broadband networks, and providing broadband subsidies to bring down the cost of broadband for consumers. One subsidy program in particular—the Affordable Connectivity Program, which was created during the pandemic and has helped connect millions of U.S. households to the Internet—is set to run out of money in spring 2024. Congress should ensure the program has the necessary funding to continue.

The FCC has a host of issues to prioritize in order to advance telecom policies that will help the startup ecosystem. These issues include opening more unlicensed spectrum for general use, identifying which communities across the country need better broadband access and resources, and reinstating strong net neutrality protections that keep the Internet a level playing field for startups. After years of back and forth at the agency and in the courts, the FCC kicked off a process in late 2023 to reinstate strong net neutrality protections that would keep ISPs from blocking or throttling lawful Internet traffic as well as engaging in "paid prioritization."