Crossing the Digital Divide Volume 33
"Option A"
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for the Observer

In case you've not heard, AT&T wants out of the Land Line business. Before 1984, there was only one phone company, commonly referred to as "Ma Bell". The Justice Department sued AT&T, and forced them to dismember their monopoly, splitting parts in an act called divestiture. After the break-up, seven regional operating companies under the AT&T umbrella gained independence: Ameritech, Bell Atlantic, BellSouth, NYNEX, Pacific Telesis, Southwestern Bell and US West. These seven companies, (with a few small players in niche markets), managed the copper lines between local exchange offices and the end-users home or business. Thirty plus years later, you can get telephone service from any number of vendors and, in many cities and towns, you have the option of fiber optic or coaxial connections instead of a pair of twisted copper wires. Those living in rural communities rarely have more than one choice, if any, for a land line, and AT&T wants out of the business. Our community is now served by Frontier Communications. While their focus may be different than AT&T or Verizon, it is still a copper-wire based telephone service, which is a dying technology, and is becoming increasingly costly to support.

Basic services – the ability to call 911 in an emergency, should not cost $100 or more/month. "Lifeline" or "Basic" telephone service, where available, is $25-30/month, and shouldn't be considered a luxury item.

Ever notice those lower lines on the PG&E poles running outside your house? Do you have PG&E service? Do you have a SmartMeter? The SmartMeter has helped PG&E reduce employee head count by thousands, and saved millions in payroll dollars. Businesses typically invest in new technology to reduce use of scarce resources and improve quality and reliability of service or services delivered. PG&E may not be the most ethical or honest oligopoly in California. But, unlike the regional phone companies, PG&E cannot deliver their product without wires.

PG&E's SmartMeter is a perfect example of technology deployed to reduce costs. These meters report usage using a radio frequency that's been developed to operate securely through PG&E's wires. The meter sends its report through the power grid from your house up to a distribution node, which aggregates reporting stations for upload to another node on the grid, and all reports end up in a computer system that prices your usage and churns out a bill. If you'd like more details: https://www.pge.com/en_US/residential/save-energy-money/analyze-your-usage/your-usage/view-and-share-your-data-with-smartmeter/smartmeter-network.page

Why bring up PG&E when I opened this column with AT&T's desire to abandon copper? Simple: the regional phone company has access rights to PG&E lines/poles. If there's a transformer breaking out low-voltage for your home, the regional phone company should have a wireless access point you can connect to for basic voice, or optional data and video services. Upgrades are generally good for business, and wireless technologies have dramatically improved since the dawn of the 21st Century. *If a phone company wants to abandon old infrastructure, they ought to deploy replacement services first.*

The breakup of AT&T has provided millions of people in countries across the globe access to technology and information we may never have seen if AT&T had remained a monopoly. Innovation is expensive, as can be competition. Let's give AT&T permission to abandon old technology and deploy new. If they're unwilling to improve service and service offerings, we should encourage our civic leaders to bid out competitive solutions, and find a telecommunications vendor who will deliver service anyplace PG&E has a pole. Public utilities should be held accountable for delivery of basic services, and fined routinely for outages beyond natural emergencies or scheduled maintenance. Basic voice/data services should be available anywhere PG&E delivers power; we need to encourage public service from our single source public utilities.