

Chris's Corner: Technology, don't take it for granted

The power of modern technology and the ability it gives us to communicate across many platforms is pretty amazing. Obviously, most millennials probably take it all for granted.

We had a rotary dial phone and broadcast TV with an antenna on our roof when I was a child. Shortly we evolved to push button pulse dial phones and the advent of cable. Then the tape recorder answering machine was all the craze. The fax machine allowed the transmission of paper documents via the telephone and it revolutionized business.

The first personal computers by IBM were quite the breakthrough allowing you to crunch lots of data and venture into publishing beyond the typewriter on a more productive scale.

The first email and internet, probably via America On Line, was in comparison to today pretty stone age.

The cell phone. The smart phone. High speed internet. Google. Modern computer technology. All are incredible. Regardless of your device, in most cases, you and the people you communicate with are easily reached with a phone call, a text message, a SMS message with picture or video, Facetime, email and more.

Basically, most of the world's collective knowledge is accessible to you in the palm of your hand if you know the fundamentals of conducting a good search. If you have an ounce of curiosity you can research your heart's desire.

This is all well and good, but there is a slight catch or caveat to it all. What if by chance, circumstance, device failure or other means you find yourself out of the grid or out of the loop?

The rest of the world keeps on chugging along with the technology but you can't connect?

My wife and recently have been experiencing this at our home out in the country.

When we bought our home five years or more ago, our smart phones had a robust 4G signal nearly 24/7. We were able to make and receive phone calls, text, send and receive emails, browse the web, use social media and stream music on demand. We could use our phones as hot spots and link up to our laptops to do real work as needed. It was life in the modern world. So easy.

However, in the last six months we have been driving back into the digital dark ages by an amazing turn around in the quality of our cell and data signals. We have gone from 3 to 4 bars and 4G to no service or one bar and 1x (whatever that is) or maybe 3G, rarely 4G.

This is our life now. Texts work ok. IMessages won't work unless you send as a text. You can't send or receive pictures. Emails of just text are fine, but you wait hours for attachments to download and upload. You can't stream music. You can't download apps. You can't use social media.

My wife is a realtor. Digital communication is the life blood of that business. I have to have access to emails on a timely basis because my business gets a lot of service requests via email. I also have to be able to share these requests to my team on a timely and 24 hour a day basis. What a mess!

Our carrier had no explanation. We had heard through the rumor mill they had a cell tower go down and they weren't going to invest in a repair. Others in our vicinity were having identical issues. Some were let out of their contracts without penalty to go with another provider with better service. Not me. I was told, that based upon where I was at, I shouldn't be having issues.

They suggested I get a signal booster that boosts the cell signal via a Wi-Fi internet connection. My cell phone is my internet connection. The only other alternative available to us is Verizon "high speed" internet through a phone line that offers between .5 and 3.0 mbps. The booster requires 10 mbps to function.

We had heard another carrier had better service in our area. Desperate we bought a prepaid phone and an unlimited data plan. We naively had hoped to use this phone as a hot spot and connect our devices to it. They don't allow their prepaid phones to be used as hot spots, unlimited data or not. So, I had to set up my work email address and my wife's work email address on this phone to make sure we were getting our emails. Thankfully it worked but it wasn't a real permanent solution.

Sharing the burner phone wasn't a workable solution and while the burner phone's data capabilities were an improvement, it had the same or worse voice signal.

Finally, out of total desperation, we ordered the "high speed" internet and a land line. Although it ranges, in truth, from .5 to 1.5 mbps based on speed test it is a marked improvement over our phone's data service. We can do most stuff well through our Wi-Fi router. When we have the days where we have little or no voice capabilities, we are going to use call forwarding so calls to our cell phones will come through the land line. Keep in mind most Comcast home internet has download speeds that are typically 25 mbps at a minimum.

So, while I am amazed at modern technology, I am also totally blown away by how your basic quality of life can be thrown for a loop because of a loss of access.