Zen and the Art of Internet Maintenance

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ECONOMICS

Chances are, if you live in the United States, you hate your internet service provider. The American Customer Satisfaction Index reports that no industry in the country is more disliked than the ISPs. Many of us have no real choice: It's either spotty service from a gigantic monopoly or nothing. The fee structure reads like a ransom note; customer support makes the seeker feel like the one bound and gagged in a car trunk.

We usually think of consumer choice as a matter of isolated individuals transacting with faceless companies and trying to do so cleverly; too rarely do we consider the choices we can create for one another.

At a cafe in the middle of a blizzard this winter, I met Rick Cobb—a few decades my senior, seated behind a formidable laptop—and he told me about his ISP. *His*. Way back when, he said, he probably would have been satisfied if Comcast or CenturyLink or whatever else had served his neighborhood in the mountains between Boulder and Nederland, Colorado. But as his needs grew beyond dial-up, the companies didn't come. So, about 15 years ago, he and a group of neighbors decided to bring the internet in themselves. With experience among them in software engineering, the cable industry, and ham radio, they began by tinkering. With a 40-foot mast held up by a car tire or cinder blocks, they tested different antenna locations to optimize the reception at their houses. They pooled their money for a good T1 connection and spread it out across the neighborhood through the thin air. Soon, other neighbors came knocking.

"We tapped into this huge, unmet demand for higher-speed internet connectivity," Cobb told me. The connection speeds still aren't great by city standards—they're no longer considered "broadband" by the FCC's new definition—but they're good enough for most people.

In December 2001, Cobb and his neighbors formalized their experiment as the Magnolia Road Internet Cooperative, named after the main road along their side of Boulder Canyon. (They refer to it by its acronym, MRIC, pronounced "em-rick.") The cost has always been a flat $50, plus some equipment. There are other small wireless ISPs in the area, but this is the only one cooperatively owned, governed, and operated by its more than 300 members.

One of them, Aaron Caplan, moved to Magnolia Road in 2004 and joined MRIC. He gradually became more and more involved. At the time, member-volunteers were doing the work of installing new antennas and troubleshooting problems, and he took part. Without much previous knowledge of internet infrastructure, he learned
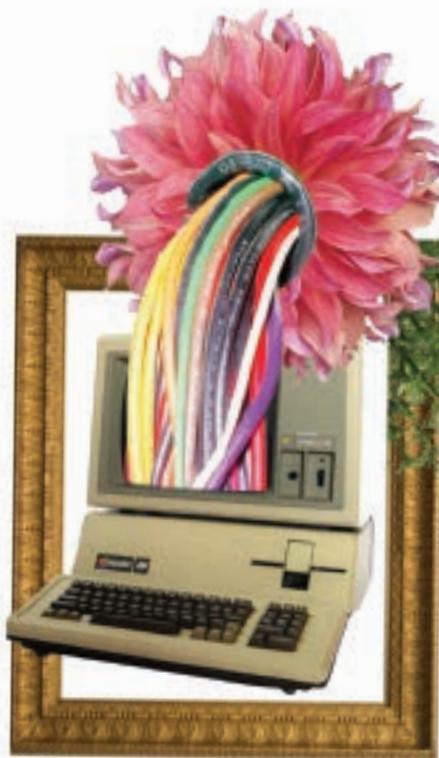
skills from other members and became one of the network's go-to technicians.

Caplan enjoyed helping so much that he cut back hours at his day job for a passport-and-visa company and started working part-time for MRIC as a paid contractor. He has kept that role even after moving his family into town, out of MRIC's range. He now works with a handful of other contractors to maintain the network's antennas.

This is a totally different way of transacting for your internet service, a way in which it is more truly *yours*. Tech support is someone you know, someone who lives nearby and relies on the same service you use. MRIC members don't have to help out with troubleshooting if they don't want to, but the option is there. Those who are so inclined get to tinker under the hood and can feel that much more wholesome and DIY-chic each time they fire up their web browsers. They can also join the board of directors if they want—or not. Unlike many other local wireless providers, there are no fixed usage caps, so members are free to use whatever bandwidth is available at a given time. But that also means they're responsible to one another not to use up more than their share. The neighbors might complain.

"We're all sharing the bandwidth, so I think there is some additional awareness," Caplan told me. "Versus it's some company and you don't care about them at all."

Boulder County is a mecca of "conscious" lifestyle; it's the home of Slow Money, and Slow Food is so omnipresent that non-organic produce can feel like a rare treat. MRIC's kind of slow computing, therefore, seems perfectly at home. But MRIC is just one of the country's many cooperative ISPs. Mostly in rural areas, they're often built atop old telephone cooperatives that, in the past, filled the gaps left by hegemonic utilities with democratic enterprise. Others are much larger, covering whole regions and crossing state lines. If more of us could trust our ISPs in this way, we might think differently about big policy questions like net neutrality, in which the debate is premised on unaccountable providers.

There's no need to reiterate the dependence that the economy has formed on perpetual internet access. But it seems incongruous that we should have to hate the ISPs that bring us this wondrous thing. An item worth adding to our collective to-do list, as we press further into the science-fiction future furnished by the internet, is for more of us to take more responsibility for owning and running it. Some of us might band together with neighbors, or some of us might pass municipal wireless in city hall. If we're going to depend on the internet, we should be able to trust where it comes from. *VICE*

Photo collage by Kitron Neuschatz