

# Benton Faculty Research Fellow Christopher Ali: The U.S. Needs a Comprehensive Rural Broadband Plan



Rural broadband is having a moment in American political discourse. The lack of connectivity in rural areas is a key issue amongst [residents](#), and a frequent talking point for [rural representatives](#). Terms like “[homework gap](#),” “[digital deserts](#)” and “[digital distress](#)” have become common phrases, while industry associations, researchers, local and state officials, lawmakers, and regulators grapple with the colossal failure of [broadband mapping](#). Taking heed, the Federal Communications Commission recently announced a \$20.4 billion funding program for rural broadband called the [Rural Digital Opportunity Fund](#) or RDOF, and a \$9 billion program for [rural 5G deployment](#). Joining the FCC, five presidential candidates have released plans to connect the country’s rural places, the most ambitious of these – [Bernie Sanders](#)’ – would see \$150 billion for grants and assistance for publicly-owned municipal fiber systems. In short, this country is about to spend more money on rural broadband than any other telecommunications program in its history.

Moments like these open the door to opportunities for real action but they also represent chances to further cement the *status quo*. Truth be told, despite the FCC’s actions and candidate announcements, rural America remains woefully disconnected from a digital world that the urban and wealthy take for granted. Worse yet, the digital divide may be growing as industry shifts gears from fixed broadband to 5G. Part of the problem is that the country lacks a coherent strategy to bridge the rural-urban digital divide. Without a plan, throwing money at the digital divide will only replicate existing inequalities inherent within current rural broadband funding programs.

The overarching issue facing the rural-urban digital divide, therefore, is not about technology, nor is it about money. It’s about policy and politics, or, rather, the lack of policy and the abundance of politics. It’s the politics of incumbency that allowed [CenturyLink and Frontier](#) to garner millions of dollars a year in CAF II subsidies and then fail to live up to their commitments. It’s the politics of technological neutrality that allowed ViaSat to come out as one of the largest winner in the CAF II Auction, [despite offering connections that fail to live up to the definition of broadband](#). It’s the politics of power that have stymied attempts to revise broadband mapping and replace Form 477 where ISPs exaggerate their rural connections. These politics, coupled with a lack of policy, have allowed the *status quo* to go on far too long.

The country lacks a comprehensive rural broadband policy, plan or strategy. This lack of coherence has led to knowledge silos and authoritative jousting between the two agencies

charged with ameliorating the rural-urban digital divide, and worse, it has allowed the major telecommunication companies like AT&T, Windstream, and CenturyLink to parlay their incumbency into preferential regulatory treatment. In my forthcoming book, *Farm Fresh Spectrum: Rural Broadband and the Future of Connectivity*, and in multiple op-eds, I lay out the necessity and scaffolding for a national rural broadband plan. Its actualization is my hope for 2020.

[Christopher Ali](#) is a Benton Faculty Research Fellow and Assistant Professor in the Department of Media Studies, University of Virginia. During his two-year Benton Faculty Research Fellowship, Ali will continue work on his new book project, **Farm Fresh Spectrum: Rural Interventions in Broadband Policy**, which investigates the relationship between farming communities, communication technologies, and communication policy in the United States.