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Peter Cochrane's Blog: The power of Wi-Fi

It's free, ubiquitous and magnetic all over the western US...

By Peter Cochrane

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Written from Mill Valley, California, on free Wi-Fi

The last time I **wrote about Wi-Fi** I got heated email from many in the EU still labouring under the misconception that IT, networks and access could be controlled. I also got puzzled emails from those in the US who couldn't comprehend what the problem was!

Well this year's summer trip saw me working up in Boulder, Colorado, and down in San Francisco. So what's the big deal? I decided to drive the whole way across mountain, plain and desert.

Over the past five years I have increasingly become accustomed to picking up Wi-Fi connections (of greater and greater bandwidth) for free. What I had not anticipated on this trip was the near universal availability in the most remote of locations. The scenic drive included towns such as: Granby, Kremmling, Silverthorne, Vail, Glenwood, Rifle, Mesa, Grand Mesa, Cedaredge, Orchard City, Delta, Montrose, Colona, Ouray, Silverton, Hermosa, Durango, Cortez, Kayenta, Cow Springs, Tonalea, Cameron, Red Lake, Williams, Kingman, Topok, Needles, Ludlow, Barstowe, Hinkley, Four Corners, Mojave, Edison, Bakersfield, Fresno, Fairmead, Gilroy, San Jose, San Francisco, Sausalito, Mill Valley... plus many more.

What surprised me most as I drove this scenic route was the number of camping and RV parks, plus hotels and B&B establishments all advertising that they provided free Wi-Fi. But the point was really driven home when I arrived in Durango, Colorado, late one night without having made a hotel booking.

I started in the centre of town and went hotel to hotel. All were offering free Wi-Fi but all had been sold out by about 19.00, and it was 21.30. I progressively widened my search going further and further afield but still no luck. Then I had a flash of inspiration. I approached the first hotel I could find not offering Wi-Fi. Bingo - it was only half full, and it never filled all night! This really was the power of Wi-Fi at work.

After an early breakfast the next morning I drove into Durango, parked up in front of one of the biggest hotels, picked up a Wi-Fi connection for free and completed my emails in about an hour. Did anyone object, did

the log-on procedure try to dissuade me or was the WEP turned on? No! I was being actively encouraged to use the service, and why not come in for coffee too?

About 10 hours and quite a bit of sightseeing later, I was in a small hotel in Kayenta on Black Mesa in northern Arizona. This really was in the middle of nowhere but there was free Wi-Fi available. And so my journey proceeded across mountain, mesa and desert. Every town and stop had free Wi-Fi advertised or available if you cared to search it out. However, the same could not be said for the mobile phone service, which was often missing altogether, or severely lacking in terms of signal level and quality of connection. So free VoIP and Wi-Fi came to the rescue.

I suppose the real highlight came when I arrived in San Francisco to find four free Wi-Fi services in Union Square alone. This was surpassed as I walked down a street to find a street vendor of sandwiches advertising free Wi-Fi too. I was so amused I took a couple of photographs...



Online with friends in Union Square, San Francisco



Wi-Fi and sandwiches!

The cost of Wi-Fi provision in the US and EU is less than the cost of a

electric lighting, water, gas, or any other service. So why charge for it? I now select EU hotels on the basis of free Wi-Fi/LAN access. In the US, as ever, it seems they got that message about three years earlier and it has become a real business driver.

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