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Free Wi-Fi is Gone Forever

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I've been fascinated by the lack of open Wi-Fi connections, not only in my neighborhood but pretty much anywhere I go. Ten years ago, it was so easy to latch on to free Wi-Fi that anyone traveling or in need of an emergency connection always had it at their disposal, despite the sketchy legality. These days, you are lucky to find one in 100 Wi-Fi connections that are not protected by passwords of some sort.

The reason for the change is simple: the router manufacturers decided to make users employ security with the set-up software. As people upgraded to newer, faster routers, the wide-open Wi-Fi golden era came to an end.

I live on a hill where I can usually see about 20 Wi-Fi connections and none of them are open. A decade or so ago, at least half of these would have been open. This means if my Comcast connection goes down—which it does every few months—I cannot latch on to someone's signal for a few minutes to get or send some e-mail. No matter what the absolutists think about this sort of activity, it is of zero consequence to the guy with the open connection.

There was an initiative in San Francisco some years back to encourage people to share open connections, but that was ruined by the newer lock down trend which only benefits the ISPs. The newest routers allow for you to spin off some of your connection for a guest network, sometimes with bandwidth limitation, but the public generally cannot even figure out how to make that work.

To prevent that sort of sharing from becoming prevalent, you'll hear scary stories about creeps driving around to get a free connection and downloading porn on someone else's account. Really? How many people are actually suckered into believing that sort of hokum? Whatever the case, I seriously do not think that this is a widespread problem.

When Wi-Fi was wide open, it was pretty amazing how easy it was to get on the Web, anytime, anywhere. That said, it's still impressive how much free Wi-Fi is provided by commercial entities, like coffee shops and airports. The JetBlue terminal at John F. Kennedy International Airport has free Wi-Fi. The Seattle-Tacoma International Airport has free Wi-Fi and the coverage is outstanding there. At Sea-Tac, you must endure a longish Hipmunk advertisement, but that's a small price to pay for access you may only need for a minute or two. But these are the exceptions. Other airports, such as San Francisco International Airport, want you to drop \$10 to get on the system.

Like water, I've always thought that the Internet should be a commonly distributed commodity. The country has pipes going every which way to distribute water, supplying water fountains for the thirsty public. You do not have to put a quarter into a slot for a sip of water at the park. Internet connectivity should be much the same. It's as much a part of life as water and electricity and we should think of it that way.

I see no way to reverse this trend of protected Internet since people see everything as a way to make a buck. I'm reminded of the era when pay toilets were ubiquitous, as onerous as that seems. I haven't seen a pay toilet for well over a decade, though, so it must have cost more to maintain than it was worth. I don't see that sort of thing happening with Wi-Fi. Secure Internet is here to stay. The golden age of free is done.

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