

Still suffering

from poor mobile coverage – here's why

By William Webb, CTO Access Partnership

On one hand consumers expect ubiquitous mobile coverage, but on the other have no expectations of coverage information being freely available. Dr William Webb asks why.



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Dr William Webb is Chief Technology Officer at Access Partnership. He oversees the development and dissemination of technology for their clients and vendors, bringing over thirty years' experience in technological communications. He was one of the youngest Fellows ever elected to the Royal Academy of Engineering, the youngest

President of the IET for a century and has been awarded three honorary doctorates and three visiting Professorships and in 2018 the IET's highest medal - the Mountbatten Award.

Have you suffered from poor mobile coverage today? The chances are that if you've been on a train, the underground,

passed through a rural area or been inside a large building, then you lost connectivity at least for a few moments. Ubiquitous connectivity is the most important factor in mobile service for most consumers – being without a phone signal can be annoying and deeply inconvenient. But despite coverage being so important, it has not changed materially for years. Why?

Ask yourself how you chose your last mobile contract. My guess is it was based almost entirely on price. You didn't consider coverage because there was no way of determining which operator would provide you with the best coverage in your home, office, across your commute, and across your leisure activities. Operators know this, so they compete on price. That's not a bad thing, but it means they are not inclined to invest in coverage as this would push up their costs for no likely gain in subscribers.

This is a classic market failure. Without good information, buyers cannot make an informed decision and so cannot send the right signals to suppliers. And where there is market failure, regulators and governments should intervene to remove the failure and allow the market to work as it should.

What you and I need is an app that we can download that confidentially monitors our typical weekly movements and how much we use our phones in each of the places we travel through and to. It can then correlate this data with highly detailed coverage maps from each operator and tell us which operator is the best match to our needs. Such an app isn't hard, it's just a variant on the crowd-sourced data apps that companies like OpenSignal have developed. So why don't we have it?

Yet again there's a market failure. While the app isn't expensive, who would pay for it? Logically, we, as consumers would, to determine which operator to select, but we have become used to getting this sort of information "for free" through comparison websites and similar. Operators probably wouldn't pay for this, or at least only the one with the best coverage, and that would lead to potential bias.

Perhaps someone will come up with an innovative funding approach, but making such an app available feels like the sort of thing national regulators like Ofcom in the UK should provide, alongside all the other consumer information that they so helpfully publish.

With such an app available, when I'm about to change my contract I download it and let it run for a week. It then gives me a recommendation, perhaps that with operator A I'll spend 4% of my time in not-spots but with Operator B it will only be 2%. Operator B is slightly more expensive, but I decide it's worth

it and chose Operator B which is then rewarded for improving their network.

Alongside this, helping operators improve their return on capital would encourage them to invest more. That's a bigger topic but we might look upon mergers and shared networks with more sympathy than we have done in the past.

Mobile connectivity is critical to our way of life, the solution to the market failure is quick and simple to introduce. Next time your phone doesn't work, move to where it does, and send a message to your regulator asking for a personalised coverage app.

Founded in 1999, Access Partnership shapes policy on behalf of the world's leading technology companies, introducing fairness and stability for services and products entering new markets. We lead countries to fair tech by monitoring and analysing global trends for risks and opportunities, and identifying strategies to mitigate those risks. We drive these opportunities to our clients' advantage through a unique mix of policy and technical expertise. the very highest standards.



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