The Daily Dish

Technology Policy and the Pandemic

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Eakinomics: Technology Policy and the Pandemic

Ten days ago AAF began a policy of optional teleworking, and nearly everyone has been working remotely since. Hopefully you did not notice. Beginning today, the District of Columbia's latest closure order goes into effect, ceasing all activity at nonessential businesses. Hopefully you will not notice.

As AAF's Jennifer Huddleston points out in her new paper, if this pandemic had hit 10 years ago the capability to work remotely, maintain social distance, and take classes from home would not have existed: "FaceTime is around a decade old. According to Pew Research, it was about 12 years ago that the majority of Americans had broadband internet at home. Streaming via services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video became available around 2007, while services like Instacart and DoorDash have yet to celebrate a decade in business. Yet in the recent days of social distancing whether for work, school, or keeping up with friends, we've embraced how these and many other tools make it far easier to stay home."

But this is not simply a stroke of good fortune. It is a direct result of the policy regime toward new technologies. The United States has relied on a strategy of minimal regulatory interference that empowers innovators and entrepreneurs. The result, according to Huddleston, is a "robust innovation ecosystem [that] has benefited American consumers by providing both a wide variety of choices and, in particular, free and low-cost options for services that are available now in a time of crisis."

And as we have now come to expect, there is a wealth of information regarding COVID-19 available on internet platforms. Google launched a coronavirus information website with state-based information and safety and precaution tips. Facebook hosted a live conversation between the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease

Dr. Anthony Fauci and Mark Zuckerberg. But much of the content we're enjoying is generated by their users.

A specific law, Section 230, is largely responsible for enabling the rise of online platforms that allow us to share and create such content. Most recently, coronavirus-related searches and hashtags have dominated online conversations, but user-generated content extends far beyond those. "Many have found welcome relief in the zoos and aquariums posting videos of animals exploring their relatively human-free locations, while parents who now find themselves helping teach children have access to various message boards, lesson plans, and more." Section 230 limits the liability of platforms for the content that users post, a protection that makes such platforms viable and content available.

The American advantage is not its tech sector; it's the technology policy that engendered its tech sector.