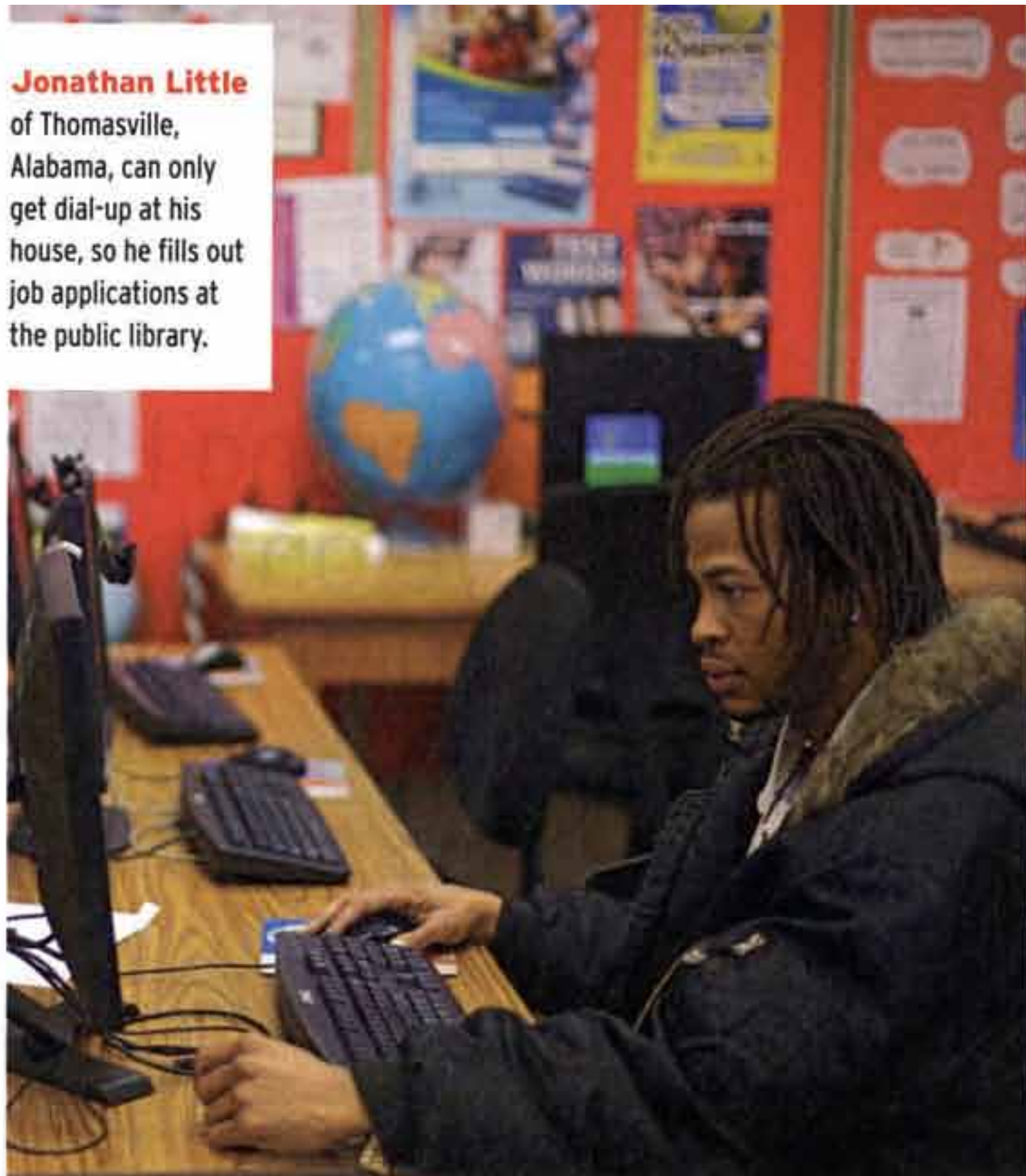


Electricity didn't come to parts of Vermont until the 1960s.

Jonathan Little of Thomasville, Alabama, can only get dial-up at his house, so he fills out job applications at the public library.



The Digital Divide

Rural America was decades late in getting electricity. Today, it's falling behind in high-speed Internet access—and in danger of being left out of the technology revolution.

BY PATRICIA SMITH

Pheylan Martin, 17, knows from experience what a challenge it is to be a high school senior without Internet access at home. Broadband isn't available at his house in East Granville, Vermont. Satellite is way too expensive. And dial-up is so slow that his family doesn't bother.

Since he can't get online while doing his homework at home, Pheylan downloads Web pages he might need to his laptop before leaving school. He can't e-mail his teachers questions like most of his classmates at Sharon Academy in Sharon, Vermont.

Then there was the problem of college applications, most of which are now done

solely online, along with federal financial aid forms. Pheylan's applications had to be filled out at school or at his mom's office. The logistics made applying early unrealistic.

"It's been really tough to coordinate things, and I feel like it's put me at a disadvantage," Pheylan says.

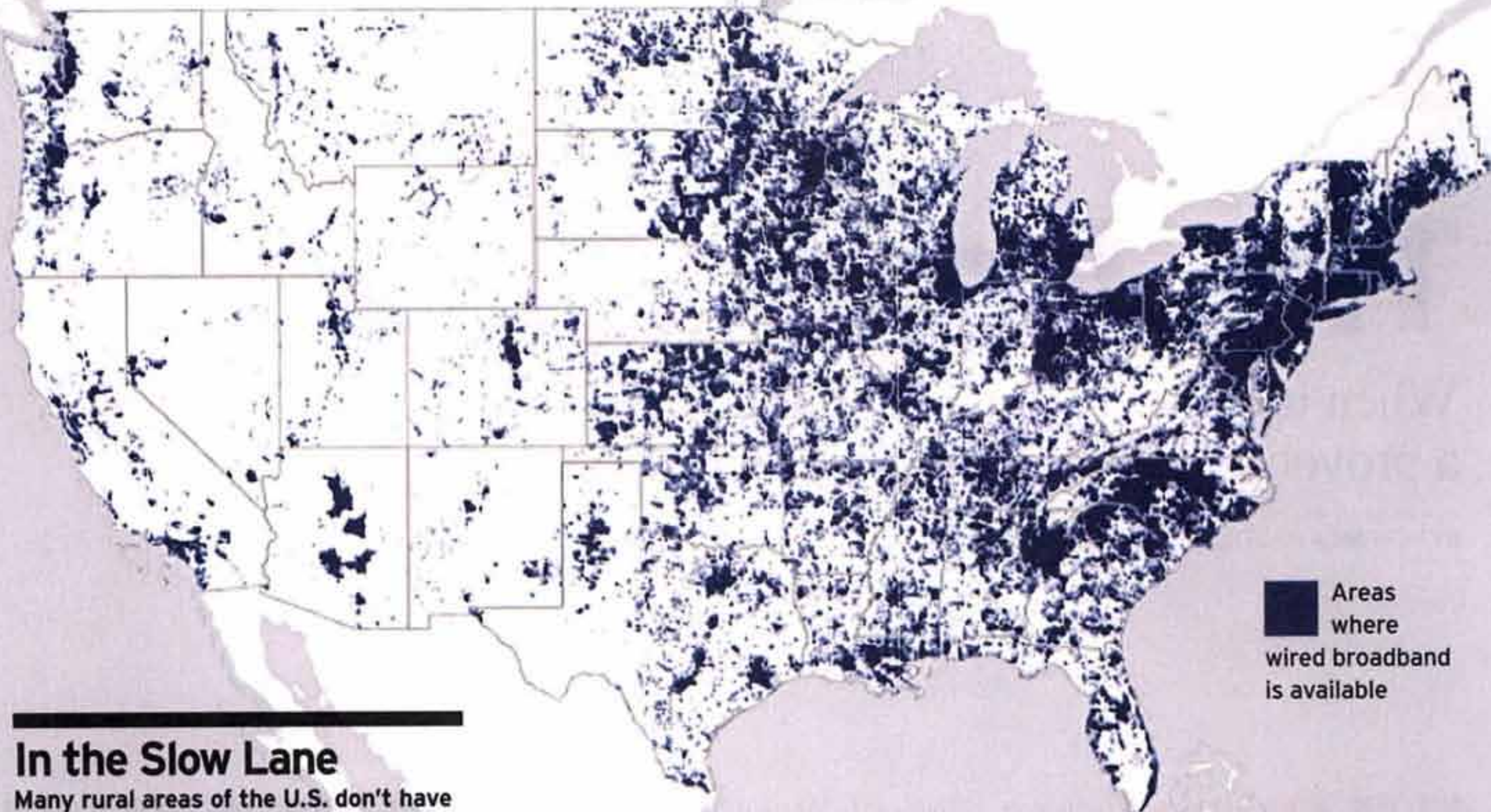
As a good chunk of daily life migrates online—2 billion people around the world now use the Internet regularly—those on the wrong side of the digital divide find themselves at an increasing disadvantage. Today, most people in urban and suburban America have reliable, high-speed Internet access, while many in rural America do not.

About 11 million Americans living in rural

areas cannot get broadband Internet service at home, according to the Department of Commerce. The Obama administration thinks this is a serious problem, and it has allocated \$7.2 billion in stimulus money to improving Internet access in the United States, particularly in rural areas.

"This is like electricity was," says Brian Depew of the Center for Rural Affairs in Lyons, Nebraska. "This is a critical utility."

Seventy-five years ago, private companies wouldn't run power lines out to the farthest reaches of rural America, since there weren't enough customers to make it profitable. President Franklin D. Roosevelt decided that the federal government should step in, and in



In the Slow Lane

Many rural areas of the U.S. don't have reliable high-speed Internet access

SOURCES: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, THE NEW YORK TIMES

1935, the Rural Electrification Administration was established.

"You often hear people talk about broadband from a business development perspective, but it's much more significant than that," Depew says. "This is about whether rural communities are going to participate in our democratic society. If you don't have effective broadband, you are cut out of things that are really core to who we are as a country."

Affordable broadband service could revolutionize life in rural parts of the country, as it has in the rest of the U.S. People could pay bills and shop online. They could run businesses from their homes and take college classes online.

Increasingly, the Internet is the best, or only, way to interact with some government offices. Or consider the job-search process: Both looking for positions and applying for them is now mostly done online.

'Obstacle to Job Creation'

Vermont Governor Peter Shumlin, who has pledged to get high-speed Internet service to the entire state by 2013, says Vermont currently ranks behind China, Vietnam, Bosnia, and Croatia in terms of connectivity.

"It's a huge obstacle to job creation," Shumlin says. "High-speed broadband and cellphone service are the electricity of the modern age."

Paul Costello, executive director of the Vermont Council on Rural Development, echoes the Governor.

"Young people, being digital natives, will not live where they aren't able to be connected," Costello says. "That's a problem because young people are the foundation for that wave

'This is about whether rural communities are going to participate in our democratic society.'

of innovation that's essential to the progress of any rural community in America."

Northern Alabama is another part of the country where many residents lack high-speed Internet access. Joyce Graham, who oversees Web-based classes at Coffeetown High School in Coffeetown, Alabama, struggled with dial-up service at her home for years. In January, she started buying satellite service with help from federal stimulus money.

"For most people out here, satellite is all you can get, and it's \$70 a month," she says.

"Now who is going to pay that? This is a poor, rural county."

Even if they can afford it, many people find satellite service frustrating: It's often not fast enough to download video or conduct a video conference. And many satellite services cap the amount of bandwidth they'll allow each customer and bump them down to dial-up speed if they go over the limit.

In terms of connectivity, the U.S. is falling behind other countries, says Darrell West of the Brookings Institution, a think tank in Washington. South Korea, which has the world's fastest Internet connections, has average speeds 10 times faster than those in the U.S. Japan, Sweden, and

Germany are among those that also have faster average connection speeds than the U.S. does.

"Broadband is like the interstate highway system," West says. "It's an infrastructure system that lays the groundwork for economic development in a variety of different areas. Unless we can close the digital divide, large parts of the country are going to remain outside the technology revolution and aren't going to get the benefits of new advances." ●

With reporting by Kim Severson of *The Times*.