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What Fourteen Answers Show About Wi-Fi Analogies

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Earlier I admitted my analogies were just not working, and asked how others explain the difference between Wi-Fi, cellular, Ethernet, fiber and the internet.

Fourteen different answers. (Big thanks to those who answered my query) Reading them together finally showed me what separates an analogy that teaches from one that quietly does damage.

Three shapes turned up.

- Utilities
- Transportation
- No analogy at all

Where analogies fall apart... and I've used all of these myself at some point in time.

A utility has a source. Water comes from a reservoir. The internet has no reservoir, it is networks agree to carry each other's traffic, and the moment someone pictures a well they start asking who owns it.

Ranking the media by speed breaks too. Driveway, road, motorway suggests fiber is faster than Ethernet, yet Ethernet runs over fiber constantly. The medium changes things, but does not set the actual speed.

Cellular is a genuine second path, and it skips your equipment entirely.

So I drew the whole thing out, and it is attached.

Here is what I did not expect, and it is the reason I am posting the picture rather than another paragraph. I have been having this conversation with a lot of people this week, and saying the words alone does not work. I can explain that Wi-Fi is not the internet six different ways and watch it not land. Then I put the drawing in front of someone and it clicks, and it clicks in one specific place: the moment they see that everything on the left is how you get ON, and everything on the right is what is OUT THERE.

Access to the internet, and what is on the internet, are two different questions. People can understand they are different the second they can see it. They cannot from merely listening to a sentence, no matter how well I build the sentence.

Skip the analogies, because they lock in the misconception rather than fix it. Wi-Fi and cellular are access links, not full paths to a server, and the icon on your phone only ever reports the access link.

The bottom of the graphic is that point, drawn. Your phone gives you a Wi-Fi meter and a cellular meter. Both describe a first hop. There is no third meter for the internet itself, which is why full bars and nothing loading is not a contradiction.

And the fastest way to prove it. Disconnect the box from the internet and leave the router/access point on. Full Wi-Fi bars, nothing on the internet loads, yet local casting and printing still work. (And you have a full Wi-Fi meter) To really test this, also put the phone into airplane mode so the cellular is also turned off.

What is the shortest demonstration you have used to make a networking idea land on someone who did not want a lesson?

I made this as a PDF, so you can download it, send it to customers, or print it to show your family when they say "The Wi-Fi is broken" when you know it is the upstream internet and not the Wi-Fi!

By Keith Parsons, CWNE #3, Wireless LAN Professionals. Free to read and share. Facts