

Exclusive: Biden's new power player on broadband and Big Tech

[Margaret Harding McGill](#) 15 hours ago - [Technology](#)



The new leader of a little-known agency within the Commerce Department starts the job tasked with connecting every American to the internet, but also has ambitions to tackle Big Tech issues on the horizon.

Why it matters: Alan Davidson, the newly confirmed head of the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), will manage tens of billions of federal spending on broadband — but he's also talking about helping set administration policy around app stores and privacy.

Driving the news: In his first major interview since taking the NTIA helm, Davidson told Axios his biggest priority is making sure every American has access to affordable, high-speed internet.

- The [\\$48.2 billion in federal funding](#) NTIA will oversee is a historic influx

of cash for internet access, and Davidson will have to navigate thorny questions, including how to make low-cost internet service available.

- The funding also includes billions for digital equity programs and for Tribal broadband programs, which Davidson says will help the agency "target communities that have been left behind."
- "This is like building the interstate highway system," Davidson said. "If we do it right, it's going to have an enduring impact on people's lives."

The intrigue: Davidson also told Axios his agency will soon launch a review of competition in the mobile app ecosystem, with a goal of producing a report this summer to help develop Biden administration policy.

- "I'm really interested in understanding the challenges, particularly that innovators have in navigating the app ecosystem now," Davidson said.
- The review will also take into account arguments from app store operators, such as Apple, on privacy and security.
- "We're really eager to understand how those things come together — how true all the arguments are, and so we'll be assessing," Davidson said, noting Biden's [executive order on competition](#) tasked Commerce with the review.

Yes, but: The broadband program will take up the bulk of the agency's resources and focus, even as it takes on tech-related issues, [including a review](#) of how data privacy issues affect civil rights.

- "My primary focus is going to be this historic moment that we have on broadband," Davidson told Axios. "But we have to walk and chew gum, and we have been given these other missions as well."

The big picture: Davidson has watched the tech industry grow up since he started Google's Washington office in 2005. (After leaving Google in 2012, he did stints at MIT, New America's Open Technology Institute, the Commerce Department, and most recently Mozilla.)

- Now, he says, "with size comes responsibility."
- "We have these incredibly successful companies that are the envy of the world, but we also need to have more rules of the road in place," Davidson said. "If we don't put those guardrails in place, we leave it open to companies to try and make up the rules themselves."

Of note: Other agencies, such as the Federal Trade Commission and the Federal Communications Commission, are tasked with tech and telecom regulation and enforcement.

- As the president's adviser for the sectors, Davidson says he wants his agency to play a bigger role in developing technology policy in the future.
- "We're not the regulator," he said. "We're the ones thinking about what the policy should be."

Between the lines: Davidson has big ambitions for a relatively small agency that has been [without a permanent leader](#) since 2019.

- The broadband deployment program alone is a huge undertaking, and one he will face questions on during his first oversight hearing before the House Energy & Commerce Committee on Wednesday.
- Plus, NTIA has a key role to play in mediating airwaves disputes like [the recent standoff](#) between wireless carriers and airlines over 5G. (Davidson and FCC Chairwoman Jessica Rosenworcel [announced a new plan](#) Tuesday to head off such problems in the future.)

What to watch: Previous leaders of NTIA have mostly come from "the telecommunications side of the house," as Davidson puts it. But the MIT-trained computer scientist turned lawyer is a "technologist at heart."

- "When you look to the future, and the kinds of issues where we're going to need policy advice, NTIA is the logical place for that work to be done," Davidson said.

