



National Broadband: More Purpose Than Religion

Broadband advocates descend on Washington to stump for a targeted national broadband strategy.

November 20, 2008

By Kenneth Corbin

WASHINGTON -- A parade of speakers from a diverse collection of advocacy groups, government agencies and academia, rounded out the case for greater broadband adoption here at a policy symposium hosted by the Internet Innovation Alliance (IIA), a group dedicated to advancing a national broadband strategy.

"There's no investment America can make that is likely to pay a better dividend than investment in broadband infrastructure," declared Larry Irving, co-chairman of the IIA.

That's become a popular topic in the nation's capital these days as a new administration with an ambitious tech agenda prepares to take office.

The broad-stroke idea that more broadband is a good thing for the country is about as controversial as politicians kissing babies -- both presidential candidates pledged to make broadband deployment a priority. But within that fuzzy framework, the issue gets a little muddy.

For instance, most of the speakers here at the National Press Club Wednesday extolled the virtues of broadband, even talked of it as a national imperative, but only with a clear goal in mind.

"If we have limited government resources, we shouldn't put out policies that are designed to be so grandiose, but should be micro-targeted to where society has a compelling public interest to make a difference," said Rey Ramsey, CEO of One Economy, a nonprofit group that works to deliver broadband to low-income communities and train people how to use the technology.

Ramsey has worked with mayors and city officials around the country, advising on projects such as the failed municipal Wi-Fi efforts in Philadelphia and San Francisco. The lesson he learned was that it is not enough to simply introduce broadband to a community without a compelling social or civic payoff.

"It's focusing the nation and saying, 'Let's be clear about what we want to do.'"

More demand than supply

To Ramsey and others, the problem is more one of demand than supply. The demand-side view claims that service is available to the majority of Americans who don't have a broadband connection, but they choose not to subscribe for a variety of reasons. For some people, cost is the barrier. Others either don't own a computer or don't see the benefit in connecting to a computer. For millions of others, dial-up service still meets their needs.

The fear that the United States is losing its competitive edge because other countries are outpacing it in broadband adoption has become a rallying cry for groups urging the government to help bridge the digital divide. Of the several recent studies ranking nations in broadband adoption, one of the most commonly cited came last year from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, which put the United States at No. 15.

That study came as a wake-up call for many, but the ardent free marketeers argue that those rankings, which measure adoption on a per-capita basis, rather than per household, paint a misleading picture.

"The OECD rankings are a distraction," George Ford, chief economist for the Phoenix Center think tank, said at a separate policy talk on Tuesday. Ford quibbles with the methodology of the study, which measure adoption on a per-capita basis, rather than per household. He also pointed out that the United States has a similar international ranking in wireline telephone service.

But the demand-siders don't claim that the broadband problem is a myth, or that it has been solved. Rather it is a problem that they are leery of throwing government money at, warning that an untargeted subsidy could produce an economic debacle without channeling the money to the places it would do the most good.

Instead, as the next administration tries to craft a national broadband strategy, the speakers at the IIA event suggested it keep high-speed Internet adoption in mind with every policy decision it faces. The Department of Housing and Urban Development might only fund affordable housing if the developer committed to make it broadband-ready, for instance.

High profile issues for broadband adoption

To underscore the urgency, they offered a long list of high-profile issues that increased broadband adoption could help resolve, whether driven by legislation, regulation or industry self-guidance.

Each was passionate to the point of evangelizing about the impact that broadband could have on issues like telemedicine, where broadband in rural areas has saved lives because a specialist at an urban hospital hundreds of miles away can oversee an operation on a victim of a car crash who might not survive the helicopter ride.

In education, students who attend schools where math and science teachers are in short supply could have access to advanced placement courses through e-learning programs, provided different states and school districts could coordinate their curricula.

And they went down the line, describing broadband as the panacea that could tackle poverty, shore up the networks used by first responders and law enforcement, and curb carbon emissions by bringing teleconferencing into the mainstream.

They even brought out Randy Hickman, a veteran of the Iraq war from rural Alabama, who described how the Internet had enable him and his fellow GIs to keep in touch with their loved ones at home.

"I hate to use a brand name, but Skype was a key word to us over there," he said, referring to eBay's Internet phone company.

Each of the groups represented, including the IIA, pledged its commitment to working with industry and the policy makers of the coming administration to craft a national broadband strategy. They'll have plenty of company.

If the recent flurry of policy talks and advocacy activity has been any indication, Bruce Mehlman, co-chairman of the IIA, was far from alone when he declared that "a person without broadband is below the poverty line."