



Broadband to the Masses: What It Takes

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Too often when we talk about the digital divide, the focus is on pockets of the country that have yet to be reached by broadband. While the nation rallies around the important work of striving toward universal broadband access, a far more extreme digital divide goes too often ignored—the millions of Americans who have multiple choices for broadband service, yet continue to just say no.

Here at the wireless show in Las Vegas, a panel on wireless in everyday life was largely taken over by this timely topic. The conversation couldn't come a moment too soon as the nation struggles to revive its economy and address pressing issues such as health care, education and conservation.

Let's listen in:

Rey Ramsey of [One Economy](#) said more than 90% of the country has access to broadband, but only 54% actually subscribe. Washington needs to take a broader look at issues from tech literacy to, of all things, U.S. housing policy. One of his many provocative ideas: Reaching the millions of Americans who live in public housing, by requiring that new builds/renovations include wiring the housing for broadband.

AT&T's Jim Cicconi, Senior EVP of External and Legislative Affairs, also joined the conversation, emphasizing the defining role of private sector investment in broadband, which exceeded \$60 billion last year. This being the wireless show, he took a swipe at communications taxes, which are among the most regressive in our nation (hitting low-income folks the hardest). He also touted [AT&T's plan to soon offer a \\$50 "netbook"](#)—a robust, small computer that [focuses on connecting folks to the Internet](#), and he talked about his company's outreach to seniors to help them get over the hurdle of understanding how broadband works and can improve their lives.

Kansas Attorney General Steve Six was also on-hand, noting the rising importance of broadband and giving the industry kudos for focusing on parental controls, so parents know what their kids are doing with that Internet in their pocket. Arkansas PSC Commissioner Colette Honorable noted that regulators had a role to play encouraging more people to make connections with broadband. She talked about the importance of innovative partnerships like Connect Arkansas and shared her hope that the nation will ultimately "age out" of much of the tech literacy challenge.

Final word goes to Cicconi on keeping the investment and innovation coming: “People tend to hold back investment if they think a new law is being considered. No one wants to invest if they can’t realize a return or, worse if they might invest in the wrong thing. In this economy, uncertainty can severely damage investment in just about any industry—and broadband in particular.” If this panel is any indication, public-private collaboration will prevail, and the true winner will be an increasingly connected nation.