



## **Other Voices: A broader broadband requires a little nudge**

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**By Brent A. Wilkes**

Among the memorable books of 2008 is Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein's "Nudge," in which the University of Chicago professors outline a new philosophical approach to governance. By creating the right incentives, government can "nudge" Americans to make the right decisions about their retirement, health and education. The book appeals to both fiscal conservatives who want to rein in uncontrolled government regulations and progressives who want the government to address unmet social needs.

Coincidentally, Professor Sunstein is a close advisor to another University of Chicago academic who made an impact in 2008: President Barack Obama. Though the current economic crisis requires a stimulus package of massive size and scope, Obama will also need to nudge Americans to change certain behaviors through incentivizing pragmatic change.

For years, some overly-eager technology activists have sought to persuade the general public of a "broadband crisis," breathlessly equating higher reported adoption rates in other countries with a failure to bring broadband infrastructure to every American. But the rhetorical "heat" obscures the "light" needed to guide policy and "nudge" us to achieving universal broadband adoption.

Broadband technologies are the ticket to economic and personal advancement in the new millennium; every uptick of 1 percent in our broadband adoption rate — the percentage of Americans who use the technology — creates as many as 300,000 American jobs. Broadband is also increasingly the gateway for personal entertainment: 50 percent of Internet users watch video online; more than 70 percent get their news from the Web.

But a crisis? Hardly. Broadband today is available in nearly 95 percent of American homes.

New technologies and business models — particularly WiMAX mobile broadband and satellite communications services — are turning the corner. Companies are investing in fiber optic lines, next-generation cable technologies and wireless services capable of 50, 100 and 150 Mbps at home. And as more consumers bundle together video, phone and

broadband services, they're recognizing savings often 30 percent lower than what they would pay for the a la carte approach of unbundled services.

But this is not to say that the United States is without broadband policy needs.

Notwithstanding near universal broadband availability, increasing competition and declining prices, only 55 percent of Americans actually subscribe to broadband at home. Some of the lag is due to the fact that many Americans get broadband at work; others are content with slower dial-up; and a small percent of rural locations are still too remote to serve.

The Obama administration will be wise to make broadband adoption a key part of its economic, health and education platforms and invest in strategies we know will encourage non-adopters to join the Digital Age.

Fortunately, the nation's true Internet pioneers are providing real-world examples for how the next administration can really "nudge" us forward. OneEconomy has used its ingenuity to get heavily discounted broadband services into public housing. Its Public Internet Channel ([pic.tv](http://pic.tv)) and multi-lingual self-help portals ([thebeehive.org](http://thebeehive.org)) spawned troves of Internet sites that were highly relevant to the everyday needs of low-income residents.

Similarly, LULAC has successfully brought high-speed Internet a little closer to many Latinos who for a number of reasons have opted not to go online at home. With the help of grants from the telecommunications industry, we have opened 54 community technology centers nationwide. The centers provide more than just access: we help train our users on important 21st century tech skills and introduce them to helpful online services that help them find jobs, pay their taxes, obtain government services, apply for home loans, and even help students with their homework. Once they see how many ways broadband can benefit their daily lives, those who visit our centers become far more likely to subscribe at home.

The goals of universal broadband adoption are bipartisan and beyond reproach, but fomenting a crisis where there is none only sets us further apart.

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