

Special Review Memorandum

Re: Broadband -- Is That All There Is?

Foreword

Commendably, most states now have programs aimed at expanding access to high-speed Internet services. In some states -- notably California -- broadband's become a big deal. There are several state agencies focused on this desirable service, and the California Public Utility Commission's even instituted the equivalent of West Virginia's famous "pop tax" to build networks out.¹ But is broadband access the only question which needs to be addressed?

Three Groups Disenfranchised

Right now, remember, there seem to be three groups which still aren't participating fully in the "Internet economy." First, there's the blind and visually impaired -- probably 1 million Americans who're completely blind, and 10 million with severe sight impairment. Microsoft's Windows operating system and its graphic interface have made it harder for the blind to use computers, "surf" the Internet, and so forth. For these folks, progress has created real access challenges.

Microsoft, to its credit, has made an effort to remedy this problem. There are special software packages available. But it's still a challenge -- especially when it comes to accessing Government web sites to retrieve forms and information. Significantly, too, no one in the Federal Government seems concerned. Out-of-sight, out-of-mind? Well, ask blind Americans about that, right?

"Aggressive Non-Adapters"

Second, there's that group McGraw-Hill's J.D. Power and Associates calls "aggressive non-adapters" -- many of whom are persons aged 65 or older. Some of these folks left the workforce before using computers was commonplace. Others resisted this technology because, like having a typewriter in your office, it was considered de-classing. Computers were for secretaries and clerks, right?

Today, lots of these people aren't poor. Look at former President Clinton or the current President. Neither are computer-literate. And, it's a problem as more public processes shift to the Internet. Ever try to get an IRS form or publication except online? What about airline reservations? Or, renewing a library book? It's a challenge, isn't it?

¹ In the 1970s, West Virginia decided greatly to improve the state university's medical school. So they imposed a 5-cents per soda drink tax -- the "pop tax." They raised the money needed and, even better, discontinued the tax. Ever heard of that? A tax being voluntarily discontinued? Where will it all end, right?

Many Hispanics

Third, a lot of Hispanics don't use computers, and don't have broadband services. And, if they don't have children, many don't know where to start.

Hispanics are heavy cellphone users. But unlike other minorities, Hispanics don't seem to have embraced the "Information Economy" fully. And, again, you have a real problem if you're computer illiterate and need Government information.

Public libraries do a good job offering public Internet access. But lots of Hispanics don't come from a library culture, either. Sure, they can ask a neighbor for help. We expect there even are bodegas now offering some sort of Internet access service. This isn't an acceptable situation, though, is it?

Assessing the Challenges and Options

Now, one of the problems here is there isn't much public or official understanding or even awareness of these shortfalls. For decades, the House and Senate Commerce Committees have been all over the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the industry like the proverbial cheap suit. But when was the last time you remember Congress focusing on the problems the "Information Economy" poses for the physically disabled, the "challenged"?

Occasionally, something's done to aid the deaf and hearing impaired -- they're a much larger group than the blind. But Congress, the FCC, and industry, even, tend to overlook these folks. Among other things, remember, they're generally poor, and not exactly an attractive market.

The aged -- aka. elderly, senior citizens, old folks -- are attracting slightly more attention. Tele-medicine's become something of a big deal. But we've never heard anyone in a decision-making or opinion-leading position raise the matter of teaching old folks how to use computers.

Ditto the issue of Hispanics, of course. Ten years ago, there was public debate over a "digital divide." Then, however, it turned out the propensity to use computers and the Internet was very income-dependent. People with comparable incomes tended to use technology, regardless of ethnicity -- except, that is, when it comes to Hispanics. Hispanic household income tends to be high, higher, indeed, than African-American. But while black Americans have embraced technology, Hispanics haven't. And, why is that the case?

A Good Assignment for NTIA

Now, the FCC could conduct something of an assessment of these matters. But the FCC and its processes tend to be supplier-driven, don't they? Ever notice how your Review for about a quarter century has been urging FCC regulation "as if people really mattered"? Well, the agency tends to spend time apportioning rents among suppliers. It tries, but it's just not good when it comes to "interfacing" with

real people.

And, while the FCC tends to be good at assembling statistics and numbers supplied by its industries, again, we're not sure sociological-type surveys are necessarily the agency's forte.

But the National Telecommunications & Information Administration (NTIA) in the Commerce Department is supposed to investigate and analyze precisely these things, isn't it? Over the years, that agency's published reports on broadband use. As part of the Commerce Department, NTIA also ought to have access to pretty detailed demographic information.

At least historically, moreover, NTIA and state agencies had at least consular relations -- unlike the situation at the FCC, where Federal and state officials seem often at each other's throat. Under pending legislation, furthermore, NTIA's going to be placed in charge of Federal "mapping" efforts -- determining exactly where in the country high-speed Internet access services are reasonably available.

"Your Assignment, If You Choose to Accept It... ."

Thus, it seems to us the Commerce Secretary, or the Chairmen of the two Congressional oversight committees, might want to consider the following assignment for NTIA, perhaps even working with the FCC.

- :: Disability Challenges. First, it seems to us the country needs to get a much better handle on exactly how many of its disabled citizens are having problems participating in the "Information Economy"? How many, where, and what's their circumstances? "Bread box"-type information like that. Additionally, there needs to be a cataloging of the Federal, state, local, and eleemosynary services already available -- and what more, realistically, needs to be done. Who was it who said the mark of civilization is how well the disabled are accommodated? Well, we have this sense that when it comes to the disabled and the "Information Economy," more needs to be done -- but, again, we need a better factual and analytical basis, right?
- :: Older Americans. Second, we need a better understanding of how far the elderly have come in just a few years. A lot of older Americans now rely on e-mail and electronic photos. Among other things, they've learned it's the only way reliably to communicate with grandchildren, right? But we have this sense there are still millions of the aged out there, electronically stranded. And, this has to be a challenge when it comes to Government services -- Social Security, health care, local government information, and so forth. This is an area where politicians and others need up-to-date, reasonably "fair-and-balanced" information. And, NTIA and the rest of the Commerce Department ought to be able to provide it.

:: Hispanics. Third, decision-makers need a better understanding of the technology challenges associated with the large -- and, growing -- Hispanic population. Should we start focusing on mobile broadband, as all Hispanics now have cellphones? Should we see what high schools can do to spur interest on the part of students -- which'll then spill-over to the parents? Reaching Hispanics is a big-deal in California, you know. If knowing how to access the Internet and the services it offers is critical to being a "successful American," what do we need to do to ensure we don't end up with these demographic enclaves out there -- large pockets of people who aren't electronically involved?

Conclusion

The various programs to expand broadband are quite worthy. We especially like one aspect of the Connected Nation approach -- this is where a local user group is organized in each county, which meets regularly to talk about needs and what can be done. But the various Connect Kentucky, or Connect Tennessee, or Connect Wyoming plans tend to be supplier and hardware oriented. Our interest is more people-focused.

We've got this marvelous technology, and all its promise. Now, we've got to figure out how these three population groups -- the disabled (especially the blind), the aged, and Hispanics -- get the same opportunities as all the rest. And, isn't that an effort NTIA and the Commerce Department should undertake and support?

Assessing the needs of these three groups isn't likely to be partisan, you know. For heaven's sake, it was the first President Bush who pressed hard for the Americans With Disabilities Act, for instance, wasn't it? We don't think anyone would object to broadening access on the part of the elderly -- or, Hispanics.

So, Congress? Encourage NTIA to undertake this assignment. It seems to us it'd be good for America -- and, with the right information, an effort to improve the situation might even work.