

The Free State Foundation

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Perspectives from FSF Scholars

August 5, 2010

Vol. 5, No. 21

Food for Thought Regarding Broadband Progress

by

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The Federal Communications Commission recently released its annual “Section 706 Report” on broadband deployment and, for the first time since the FCC began to issue this report, concluded that broadband is *not* being “deployed to all Americans in a reasonable and timely fashion.” Surprisingly, a majority of the FCC came to this conclusion despite finding that 95% of Americans have access to broadband. In fact, previous Section 706 Reports (issued by both Democrats and Republicans) have extolled America’s achievements in connecting individuals over the past decade. Today, not only do 95% of Americans have broadband access at home, but also at school, work, and increasingly on the go. The U.S. leads in broadband at schools, in wireless connectivity, and hotspots – most of which are free.

Additionally, the government already provides subsidies to connect schools and libraries, low income and rural Americans, and rural healthcare providers with regional research hospitals. Nevertheless, some Americans who do have access to broadband decide not to use their family budget to subscribe. Just as we learned with respect to the DTV transition, some people affirmatively choose not to utilize these technologies, at least not early on.

Following in the FCC’s footsteps, some left-leaning organizations joined in this unfounded criticism of America’s technological advances by decrying the state of broadband deployment as “inadequate” or “unacceptable.” They even went so far as to state that “other nations are passing us by.” In reality, except for a few nations

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that heavily subsidize broadband (and also rank at the top of high tax nations), the U.S. has been, and will continue to be, a global leader in broadband. Moreover, without *America's* visionary scientists, entrepreneurs, and engineers, it is unlikely that broadband or the Internet would even exist. Nor would the world be as globally connected today without the contributions of U.S. investors and large and small infrastructure providers utilizing all varieties of technologies.

More radical detractors of this explosive broadband growth have even compared this so-called lack of broadband to a lack of grocery stores. But perhaps we should take a lesson from our government's food and hunger policy and encourage the detractors of our current broadband services to be part of the solution. Rather than new indiscriminate broadband spending initiatives, perhaps certain eligible Americans could have "broadband stamps" – after all, a similar, well-established program called Lifeline/Linkup currently exists to support access for ordinary telephone service.

Such "broadband stamps" would then allow certain low-income eligible citizens to purchase broadband services on a technology-neutral basis from a cable, telephone, wireless, or satellite provider. The stamps could underwrite a minimum broadband package, consisting of enough "bytes" to surf the web and send emails to family members. Then, such citizens could make their own decisions about whether they wanted to utilize their broadband stamps for some amount of circumscribed access, or also contribute their own hard earned cash to get a gourmet selection that might cost them a little more, or even an even more expensive "all you can eat" bundle of services. Still others might decide they want to use their stamps for a pre-pay provider so they know exactly what they are getting on the front end and how it will affect their family budget. And, with the prospect of these new subscribers, companies might find a business model that would also incentivize the deployment of "fast food" (faster broadband speeds) in rural, remote, and low income areas.

So rather than dictating what Americans "should" get, or what is "best for them," let's let Americans decide for themselves what type of services they need for their own families. As broadband networks continue to pour over \$30 billion in private capital per year into broadband infrastructure, at a time when the government has had to bail-out other market sectors, maybe those who criticize the state of broadband access should get to work on a real problem and start building more grocery stores in low-income or blighted areas in a "reasonable and timely fashion."

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