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Broadband Access

Commentary

Examining Broadbandama

Broadband expansion should be left to carriers, not the government

by A. Michael Noll

President Obama's economic stimulus plan includes at least US$6 billion for broadband — and advocates for the stimulus would like much more. "Broadbandama" proposes to make broadband available to Americans — particularly those in rural America. This is a pork barrel, reminiscent of the Internet bubble of the past when excess broadband capacity was constructed across the nation.

The broadband advocates want capacities of 100 million bps to every home, citing studies that claim that the United States has fallen behind the rest of the world in broadband access. Decades ago there were studies that claimed that the U.S. was behind in digital switching. These studies were flawed in how different countries interpreted and answered the questions — the U.S. was not behind. One can only wonder whether today's studies are similarly flawed and just ammunition for the advocates of today's broadband.

Just what is broadband? Decades ago, when most modes operated at 1200 bps, 56 kilo bps was considered high speed and a technological challenge. Then along came DSL offering hundred of kilo bps for Internet access. And today Verizon's FIOS offers tens of mega bps.

Most Internet use is for e-mail, which requires very little bandwidth. If a serious effort were made to eliminate all the spam on the Internet, vast capacities would be released from the waste of spam. The Internet service that requires large capacities (but less than 10 Mbps) is video. But there are more efficient ways of delivering video, such as the model used by CATV in which a hundred or so programs are transmitted to all homes at the same time over broadband cable. Verizon utilizes a similar model but over optical fiber direct to each home.

In fact, Verizon has already invested billion of dollars in installing broadband optical fiber to homes across the United States in its serving areas. There is no need for government to invest in broadband

infrastructure when industry is already doing so. We do not want the government to own and operate the nation's communication infrastructure.

It seems that this is the time to promote pet projects. So what stimuli do I think should be done? The communications and power lines that traverse the nation's city streets, particularly in downtowns, should be placed underground. Federal grants could be made for such costly improvements in infrastructure — real jobs would be created over the years and something of value would be left behind.

Mr. Obama wants to increase funding for research — mostly at academic institutions, which already receive a small fortune in federal funding. Research at academic institutions has an important role and clearly needs to be maintained adequately. But many of the innovations in telecommunications (and other industries) came from industrial research laboratories — and many of these labs have either closed or have been drastically derailed.

If Mr. Obama wants to assure the technological leadership of the United States, then something needs to be done to recreate the environment of the great industrial research laboratories of the past (such as those of AT&T, IBM, RCA, Xerox, DuPont, etc.). But how to accomplish this is not clear, since the monopolies that were able to support these labs of the past are mostly gone.

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