

The Net at Risk



It is ironic that as schools look for ways to provide students with one-to-one and even 24/7 access to technology that the United States lags far behind the rest of the industrialized world in broadband Internet access. I am not exactly in rural Oregon, yet the only affordable home option for me beyond dial-up is DSL. The Bill Moyers special on PBS last month titled *The Net at Risk* explained why and was quite an eye-opener. If you didn't see it, you can view it online at <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/moyersonamerica/net/>.

There are plenty of ideas about why the United States is lagging behind in broadband penetration and affordability, but very little agreement. Telecom industry watchers say that the telecom industry promised consumers a fiber optic network in the 1990s in exchange for tax cuts, but never delivered. Fifty state regulators were supposed to hold the companies to the agreement, but have not done so, perhaps because they are too close to the very industry they are supposed to be regulating.

Some organizations, such as Free Press (<http://www.freepress.net>), a nonpartisan media policy group, blame the gap on lack of a comprehensive national broadband policy. Current policy has resulted in some new investment for business, but investment in broadband for local residential customers remains far lower than in other countries.

Some critics fault the Federal Communications Commission for not living up to its mandate. The federal Telecommunications Act of 1996 requires the FCC to determine whether high-speed access is being deployed to all Americans in a reasonable and timely fashion. If it is not, the legislation directs the FCC to take action. But the FCC uses a low speed (200 Kbps)

to define broadband and considers one broadband customer per zip code as adequate success.

As you would expect, communities have looked at ways of laying fiber and building the connection themselves. The special had a great look at how Lafayette, Louisiana, rallied community support and built their high-speed fiber network. The community had to survive intense lobbying of its state legislators by phone and cable companies and the delays of a lawsuit but was ultimately successful. Apparently there are hundreds of community and municipal broadband projects underway or in the planning stages, but there are also 14 states that either prohibit communities from building their own networks or have passed laws that make it more difficult.

For schools that currently have broadband access the question is, are they getting a fair deal? Should the cost of access be less? Access at all is still an issue for many rural schools, and all students would benefit by having broadband access at home.

The Moyers program also discussed Net neutrality. Here the debate is hot and allegations are flying about the stifling of free speech, the holding back of progress, and corporate greed. It does seem clear that the telecoms, after reneging on their promise for high speed access, now want to create a fast lane and a slow lane and charge more for the fast lane. Somehow I don't think schools will be the winners if that happens.

It appears that in addition to advocating for funding for education and technology to support school improvement, we now have to advocate for faster and more widespread broadband access as well as determine the best course for maintaining Net neutrality. ■

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