



THE MOBILE INTERNET: COMMUNITIES OF COLOR AND LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

“Research has shown that people with an actual connection at home, the ability to go online on a computer at home, are more engaged in a lot of different things than people who rely on access from work, a friend’s house, or a phone.”

—Aaron Smith, Pew Senior Research Specialist

I LOVE MY WIRELESS TOYS, BUT THEY’RE EXPENSIVE AND LIMITED

We all love our cell phones, PSPs, iPads, and laptops—because they connect us to community, opportunity, and democracy. However, under the current rules passed by the Federal Communications Commission, our wireless devices don’t always love us back. Right now, users of mobile broadband get none of the protections provided to users of fixed broadband. Today, communities of color, America’s poor, and young people are the most likely to access the Internet through their wireless device. As a result, the poorest and most vulnerable wireless users often get stuck with high bills and data plans that only give us half the Internet we need. If America’s most under-represented communities have only one door through which they can access the most vibrant and decentralized media in a generation, then everything must be done to keep that door wide open.

I DON’T GET IT! WHAT’S THE DIFFERENT BETWEEN FIXED AND MOBILE BROADBAND?

Okay, let’s break it down.

- **Fixed Broadband:** Internet services such as DSL, cable, and fiber-to-the-home (FTTH) are wired to specific buildings. Traditional wi-fi hotspots also provide connectivity over a limited radius around fixed wireless access points.
- **Mobile Broadband:** Mobile broadband refers to high-speed wireless Internet connections and services designed for use from arbitrary locations—i.e., broadband access in the cellular environment. Just as the cellular phone freed users from a phone plugged into the wall at a specific location, mobile broadband is doing the same. Users are no longer confined to desks, tethered to wires, or restricted to a stationary environment. Cell phones, and other mobile devices, now allow users to connect to a wireless broadband Internet service wherever they are.

WHAT’S THE PROBLEM AGAIN? THE CHALLENGES OF MOBILE BROADBAND

- **Prices/fees:** Monthly service plans can cost more than traditional broadband services, often including over-age fees for larger volumes of data usage, and other hidden costs such as activation fees, the cost of network cards, and early termination fees.
- **Network speed:** “High-speed” is often misleading. Mobile broadband is usually slower than fixed broadband, sometimes less than 1 Mbps (vs. 4 Mbps on fixed), depending on the service provider’s network capability.



- **Network coverage:** Though mobile broadband coverage has expanded, it's still limited. Cities, along with corridors of the interstate highway system, have the best coverage, while availability is challenging or non-existent in rural areas.
- **Network reliability:** The range of reception is more limited—service can be disrupted inside large buildings due to interference, or in areas with difficult terrain.
- **Bandwidth:** The bandwidth available to mobile broadband customers is generally much smaller. Heavy Internet users often notice they cannot surf, stream, view or download as quickly on their mobile devices.
- **Functionality:** A cell phone or mobile device is not a substitute for a laptop or desktop computer. Many everyday Internet needs such as applying for a job, conducting research, registering for classes, or accessing government or social services are difficult or impossible on a mobile device.

WHAT'S AT STAKE FOR COMMUNITIES OF COLOR AND LOW-INCOME FAMILIES?

As we transition to a new economy, the power to communicate, and therefore imagine a better future, should belong to everyone. But in December 2010 the FCC passed rules that provide only the most minimal protection to wireless users.¹ These new rules have created a segregated Internet where wireless users are left with blocked and tiered service.

The lack of consumer protections for wireless users directly disadvantages individuals already excluded by the digital divide. According to a report by the Pew Research Center, 18% of blacks and 16% of English-speaking Latinos access the Internet only from their cell phones, compared with 10% of whites.² While Latinos and blacks are more likely to access the Web via their cell phones, they are often limited by the content they can access, and the functionality that is available for everyday needs. For example, it can be difficult—or impossible—to fill out a job application or schedule an immigration appointment on a cell phone.

“Ethnic consumers” (what the companies call us) are the major buying power in the telecom market³. “Cell phone ownership is higher among African-Americans and Latinos than among whites[, and] minority [sic] cell phone owners take advantage of a much greater range of their phones’ features compared with white mobile phone users.”⁴ By 2009, one out of every three dollars spent on telecommunications services came from U.S. ethnic communities.⁵ This high usage drives how wireless companies interact with us.

1 http://news.cnet.com/8301-30686_3-20026283-266.html

2 <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Mobile-Access-2010/Summary-of-Findings.aspx>

3 <http://www.insight-corp.com/reports/ethnic2.asp>

4 <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Mobile-Access-2010.aspx>

5 US Hispanic Use of Telecommunications Services: Spending Patterns for Wireless and Wireline Services 2010-1015, <http://www.insight-corp.com/reports/hisp10.asp>



FACTS YOU CAN USE⁶

- Nearly two-thirds of African-Americans (64%) and Latinos (63%) are wireless Internet users.
- 87% of blacks and Latinos own a cell phone, compared with 80% of whites.
- 18% of blacks and 16% of English-speaking Latinos are cell-only wireless users, compared with 10% of whites. In total, more than half of African-Americans (54%) and Latinos (53%) go online from a mobile phone.
- 19% of 18-to-29-year-olds are cell-only wireless users, compared with 13% of 30-to-49-year-olds, 9% of 50-to-64-year-olds and 5% of those ages 65 and older. In total, nearly two-thirds (65%) of 18-to-29-year-olds are cell phone Internet users and 84% go online using either a cell phone or a laptop with a wireless Internet connection.
- 17% of those earning less than \$30,000 per year are cell-only wireless users, as are 20% of those who have not graduated from high school and 15% of those who have graduated high school but have not attended college.
- Among those who go online using a handheld device, 55% of English-speaking Latinos, 52% of college graduates, and 56% of those with a household income of \$75,000 or more per year use their cell phone to go online several times a day.

WHAT YOU CAN DO: A MEDIA JUSTICE VISION FOR WIRELESS EQUITY

Broadband parity: Our national broadband strategy must ensure parity between fixed and mobile broadband, treating them as different and bordering entry points on the same communications backbone.

Address the needs of low-income users: Mobile broadband affords communities of color and America's poor greater access to the social and economic benefits of the Internet. Lifeline/Link-up programs should expand discounts to qualified low-income wireless customers to purchase handsets and subsidize monthly connectivity.

Job training and workforce development: Mobile broadband policy should expand opportunities for skills development and create living-wage jobs in this rapid-growth industry, moving our communities from exploited consumers to skilled and well-paid workers.

Consumer protections: Federal rules must protect mobile broadband users from unexpected fees related to activation, early termination, and data overages.

⁶ Source for all information in this section: <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Mobile-Access-2010/Summary-of-Findings.aspx>