

Comcast should bring low cost broadband to everyone

On Tuesday September 20th, 2011 Comcast Executive Vice-President David Cohen and Federal Communications Commission Chairman Julius Genachowski, along with D.C. Public Schools Chancellor Kaya Henderson and D.C. Mayor Vincent Gray, announced a plan to provide low-cost broadband to families eligible for the National School Lunch Program.

Low-cost broadband to low-income families? A welcome gesture, of course, but the entire cable industry, including Comcast, can and should be doing more to ensure all families have access to this critical communications technology.

Access to broadband is just as important to low-income households without children as it is to those with kids. So while this Internet-essentials offering is a better deal than Comcast's standard overpriced service, it's important to remember that it's available only to a small subset of the population that truly needs it.

It's also important to remember that this lower-priced offering came only as the result of Comcast's effort to get its takeover of NBC Universal approved, and is not guaranteed to last. To secure approval for its mega-merger, Comcast made a list of "voluntary commitments," which are essentially unenforceable, and both the commitments and the conditions the FCC and the Department of Justice placed on the merger come with expiration dates.

If we are truly serious about tackling the digital divide, we cannot rely on the altruism of large providers; we need policies that promote real competition. Competition, not corporate good will, will incentivize Comcast to lower prices across the board.

In 2009, the cable industry announced "Adoption Plus," an initiative that would have offered low-cost broadband service to low-income households - similar to Comcast's current low-cost offering. The plan certainly had flaws, and was not fully baked, but was a potential step toward increasing broadband adoption. But the plan grew out of concern about the National Broadband Plan's potential to encourage regulatory intervention in the cable market to bring America up to speed in the global economy. Once it became clear that the FCC had no appetite to increase broadband competition in order to lower prices, the industry players bagged A-Plus. Why not bring it back, across the entire industry, without the limitations on who can qualify?

Cable Internet providers make a nearly 80-percent profit margin on their service. There's no reason why all providers, including Comcast, can't commit to bringing all Americans affordable Internet access.