

## The Sorry State of American Broadband

by Brandon McNaughton

Most international examinations of broadband speed and penetration label the USA at number 27. While big companies like Verizon, AT&T, et al., decry these studies as flawed; the numbers are largely correct. The US lags behind in the broadband race. To be sure, there are legitimate arguments to be made about the sheer size of the United States, and the cost of rolling out a robust and future-proof fiber optic network are very high. The sad truth, however, is that much of our communications infrastructure is extremely old copper and coaxial wiring. These materials simply cannot sustain further growth. The FCC must take a hardline stance on broadband penetration.

Take, for example, recent laws passed in a variety of states wherein the Big Broadband companies colluded to have laws passed against community broadband networks; often in areas that are sorely under-served by those same conglomerates. Chattanooga Tennessee recently completed its fiber optic network, despite lies, smears, and obfuscation in the courts designed to make the rollout too costly for the local government to complete. This anti-competitive behavior has become more and more widespread in the last two to three years. Louisiana, Minnesota, West Virginia, and many more have all seen anti-public broadband laws passed; most of which merely make the cost of entry and regulatory burden too vast for small local governments to overcome, but a few that have outright banned such community endeavors. All to protect local and regional duopolies held by the local (often by national companies) cable companies and telephone companies.

Furthermore, both existing and planned fiber rollouts by Big Broadband have largely been halted. These companies have further colluded so-as not to need to compete with each other in any given area. They have carefully crafted an illusion of competition. If one looks at the data, one can easily see that in instances of a community broadband or private local network managing to overcome the high cost of entry; consumer prices have decreased, speeds have increased, and customer service has been improved. Contrast this to areas where Comcast, Verizon, AT&T et al reign unopposed: you find high (and increasing) prices, indifferent (or even insulting) customer service, and bare minimum speeds.

For a greater contrast, look at Europe. Many countries there have passed regulations that unbundle ISP's from network infrastructure ("local loop unbundling") such that a single robust cable or fiber optic network is in an area, but on that network there are twenty to thirty distinct service providers offering bundles and great speeds at extremely low prices by American standards. All across Europe the cost of internet service is low, competition is fierce, and as customers are not locked to a single provider; they have myriad options. We need those options here.

Big Broadband is more concerned with profits and investor happiness than in serving their subscribers; the virtue of having a largely captive audience. Indeed, in a recent Comcast earnings call

with investors, they said that their network capacity was largely future-proof, and that they expected to be able to raise prices on consumers without needing to spend capital on network expansion! Verizon Wireless recently purchased a series of spectrum from a group of cable companies in exchange for an agreement not to compete with them! These are just a couple of the examples of the abuse that these companies pile on consumers! Bandwidth caps on a network that doesn't need expansion? Prices that go up while costs go down? Is it not the place of the FCC to protect consumers, rather than corporate profits?!?!

Finally, speeds. 4Mbps/1Mbps is abysmally slow. It's ridiculous to pretend that this is adequate for anything other than reading email or surfing websites that are mostly text. This is the age of graphical web interfaces, motion ads, and streaming video! This is the age of cloud data, protein folding, and digital distribution! The consumer's need for capacity will only grow larger! It is imperative that America have a robust and future-proof network, whomever has the will and the means to roll it out! Just look at Google, rolling out a brand new fiber optic network in Kansas City over the next year or so! That is the way it should be: blazing fast speed, simple offering, low price!

Let me outline some solutions:

1. Local loop unbundling:

Benefit - Multiple ISP's on a given infrastructure, more competition, lower prices.

Cons - Corporations whine.

2. Minimum speed of 15/5 to qualify as broadband, to double every five years (30/10,60/20, etc.)

Benefits - Consumers can use the whole internet, not just the text bits. Speed increases as capacities increase. Networks forced to upgrade to keep up.

Cons - Corporations whine.

3. Uphold the 1996 Telecommunications Law, to wit -no state or locality may pass legislation that infringes upon the creation or expansion of American broadband." with anti-competitive laws that restrain or ban community or local privately funded networks.

Benefits - Fiber optic networks created in under-served areas, corporations forced to compete honestly.

Cons - Corporations whine.

4. Uphold the "Declaration of Internet Freedom" as the definition of Net Neutrality. Just as roads are neutral in America, so ought the internet be.

Benefits - Internet treated as a public utility, thus corporations must make their profits by offering superior products and customer service, at lower prices.

Cons - Corporations whine.

5. End bandwidth caps!

Benefits - Capacity MUST expand, new business models and services emerge, prices drop.

Cons - Corporations whine.

There are other things that ought be done, but these five points are, I believe, absolutely necessary to move American broadband back in the direction of competition and expansion. The FCC can strike a decisive blow against corporate welfare here by instituting simple reforms, and not being afraid to go "to the mat" for them. If Comcast doesn't want to open its network up, perhaps the FCC puts out a commercial broadcast about how Comcast is harming competition by not complying. If Verizon doesn't feel the need to expand it's Fiber Optic service area, the FCC goes public about how Verizon is prioritizing profit over the good of consumers. Shame them(!) into compliance!

In closing, I would just like to thank you for your time, and to direct your attention to websites such as <http://www.muninetworks.org/> , <http://mediacitizen.blogspot.com/> , [www.arstechnica.com](http://www.arstechnica.com) , [www.theverge.com](http://www.theverge.com) ; for the technologist viewpoint on this issue. For forward thinking solutions, and a succinct analysis of the American Broadband industry; one should not ask those on top. Instead, ask the techies, the nerds, and the entrepreneurs how their future depends on competitive broadband coming to America!

Regards.