

Free Bandwidth

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The public interest and the social good are things often referred to yet not always pursued. We usually recognize that humans have rights, and that those rights include housing, food, and a general quality of life.

The public Internet is something that is also assumed, and similarly rarely pursued. We recognize that the public uses the Internet, but is the Internet in anyway public? Do we and can we recognize that communication is also a right?

If we want to have a social good or public interest in our network society, than we need the Internet to be “public”, in the same way we think of the airwaves as being in the public domain and subject to regulation.

In order for the Internet to be public, bandwidth must be free.

Free as in subsidized. Costs still exist, and its important to account for these costs, but its also crucial to create an environment in which the public (interest) can exist, let alone flourish. We talk about the erosion of sovereignty and the encroachment of culture, but what are we doing about it? Creating a public Internet (itself an extension of public space) by subsidizing broadband connections is one step in that direction.

The catalytic element in this equation is literacy. The reason we subsidize education (at all levels from kindergarten on up) is because we want meaningful members in our society. Now mind you, at times school does seem and feel like its purpose is to produce cogs for the working world, but in essence, at least in its mandate, its role is to create responsible (literate) members of our society.

However, present reality what it is, we live in a network society. Media makes everything (especially reality) and those who have media literacy are those who are generally able to do well.

In fact, lets be more precise, those who have Internet literacy, even know how to run their own Internet server, and say know what a “root” account is, those people tend to be more empowered in our current world. They tend to know where they are, and how to get where they want to go. Informational power in our society can lead directly to cultural, economic, and even political power.

That’s why maybe the solution is to give it out, hook them up, spend the dough to get everyone online and literate when it comes to media. Note I keep using the word “literacy”. The point is not to create spammers or brain-dead online consumers. Rather the issue is about

teaching people who they can create, how they can communicate, how they can do business with people far away.

Perhaps then its not unreasonable to suggest, even demand, that the ability to communicate is an inherent and inalienable right that all humans must possess.

So how does such a telecommunications regime that provides free bandwidth come about? On the supply (money) side, you'd probably have to have taxes.

As a means of beginning to address global warming, increase taxes on private and fossil-fueled transportation to subsidize bandwidth. Gasoline, oil, automobiles, roadways, all forms of private polluting transportation. Then take that money and use it to subsidize bandwidth and public transportation.

Another approach, which is articulated in a parrallel discussion paper, would be a tax on Intellectual Property. The combination of these two policies could create a new regulatory regime. [1]

A regime that rather than sit on its hands while big business plunders and commits accounting fraud, instead seeks to empower communities and foster a genuine competitive market environment. This regulatory regime might have two halves, one focused on facilitating, the other on enforcement. And in both roles, the "agency" that carries out this mandate, can be community-based, distributed, and based on peer-review, in a similar manner as to how the Internet operates itself.

Whether limiting the intrusiveness of spam and other unsolicited commercial requests, or helping young and old learn to use the media and its environment, a distributed community regulatory agency could play a role in protecting and providing a public (interest) Internet.

Similarly, one would not want to see existing privately-held telecommunication monopolies get bigger on the backs of the taxpayer. Maybe a voucher system, that let each user (re: citizen) decide where their bandwidth would be supplied from and by whom, making it more feasible for there to be smaller players, and then add to that an additional "infrastructure" fund that encourages people to develop alternative (for example wireless) infrastructure.

Clearly all of this is going to cost a lot of money, but the payback is worth it. Think of it as an investment in the future, as its an investment in users (citizens), who are the defining characteristic of the system (society). If managed correctly instead of sticking with the monopolies we've always had, smaller and more agile outfits could emerge and prosper.

Ironically one only has to look towards radio and television for models of public resources which have operated as a result of subsidization. In these media both public and private broadcasters have effectively allowed either the taxpayer or advertisers to subdize what appears to the consumer as relatively free information. Of course all of this began with the premise that the airwaves are themselves in the public domain, and with that assumption has come heavy regulation (of radio and television).

The Internet however has had a different course. While also having its start in government funded initiatives, it was much more rapidly handed over to the private sector, and from a very early stage its entire infrastructure was in private hands. Governments, led by politicians elected by television and newspapers, allowed the private sector to run rampant, and build all sorts of crazy schemes, most larger than life, and most resulting in bankruptcies and investigations of accounting fraud.

Certainly two truisms that have come out of the great Internet bubble of the late 1990s are that online advertisements do not subsidize the medium, and that left to the private sector, the Internet will be nothing more than a grand, in-your-face-pop-up-porn strip mall.

Then of course there is the peer-to-peer phenomena which flies in the face of all corporate logic when it comes to the Internet. Rather than go to central distributors for high-priced products, users would rather share freely amongst themselves, computer to computer, with minimal commercial activity, and explosive cultural effects. Music, Videos, Software, Texts, and Images spread as rapidly as they can across all the computers on the net. One can't imagine the spread of culture working at a faster pace.

And yet the telecommunications costs are huge. Largely due to the existing hierarchical design of the Internet. Nonetheless, when the peer-to-peer explosion happened, starting with Napster, the bills for bandwidth started hitting ISPs and other telecom firms who had not anticipated such a large increase in what is essentially unprofitable traffic.

That's where the model fell apart: telecommunication companies are either going bankrupt, or taking extreme cost-cutting measures to survive, and the regulatory regime itself is in a crisis of legitimacy as it appears powerless to engage or influence the economic and social forces that are changing our world.

So comes a time when ludicrous ideas are considered, and alternate models are entertained. Those cash-strapped companies that are still around will inevitably start charging more money for Internet connections, and further pro-rate usage, so that the more you do, the more you pay. A pay-per-usage system that equates economic status with communications ability.

Yet it is at times like this that we can step back and see the consequences of such actions. We are still at an early stage in the development of the Internet, and to exclude persons from it, or restrict what can be done with it, seems to be the type of crippling mistake that it would take a lifetime to recover from.

The erosion of the public sphere must be stopped and reversed. What we need from our public institutions is the leadership to chart a new regulatory regime that serves the interest of our entire society, i.e. the social good.

One way to catalyze this process would be to introduce a system of public-subsidization of bandwidth that would allow members of our society to freely explore and create their space in this emerging media environment. Doing so would go a long way in helping to revive the democracy we desire in our political system and our world.

Notes

- 1) <http://news.openflows.org/article.pl?sid=02/04/23/1523232&mode=nested>

[Written in Toronto over the Summer of 2002]