

What Can We Do To Address Digital Inclusion?



Sascha Meinrath Oct 11, 2006



This is PART II of a 3-part series on Digital Inclusion perspectives from around the globe.

When do we recognize a shift in the fundamental social fabric of civilization? Where do we look to find better exemplars of participatory democracy? When do we realize that notions of justice have to expand to include a new ways of thinking about human rights? How do we change our institutions to support a more just and equitable world? These are the questions that thought leaders in the community and municipal wireless movement have been asking themselves more and more over the past few years.

Many telecommunications scholars have written that the first decade of the 21st Century is a "critical juncture" in communications history. An era where a confluence of national and global events, social movements, and political thinking combine with scientific advances to create exciting shifts in civil society. As Dr. Mark Cooper, Director of Research for the Consumer Federation of America writes, "every couple of generations capitalism plants the seeds of its own transformation by fostering waves of technological revolution."

Much like the advent of electricity, the telephone, or television, current advances in data communications are creating changes in our society far faster than we can document or comprehend. Thus, as Greg Richardson, Founder and Managing Partner for Civitium, discusses, "Given the scarcity of historical case studies and proven methods for success in this area, much of our work is 'cross-pollinating' information from community to community...efforts in this area are still in a period of intense experimentation." In essence, much like early electrical or telephone implementers, pioneers in the field of wireless networking are learning in real-time. Though many municipal decision-makers would rather see definitive answers and "tried-and-true" methodologies, the reality is that the technologies, business models, and uses of these networks are still rapidly evolving.

However, certain tools were consistently mentioned by those interviewed for this series as useful to digital inclusion efforts -- "more unlicensed spectrum," "low-cost hardware," and "education initiatives" for the general public and local, state, and national policy makers were all discussed by multiple interviewees. As Jim Snider, Senior Research Fellow at the New America Foundation, warns, for wireless systems, "the network can ultimately only be as good as the spectrum it uses." Many thought leaders see one promising avenue as the growing support for "bipartisan legislation in Congress to open up the TV white spaces for unlicensed use." According to Snider and others, these frequencies would provide new tools and resources for network implementers and greatly expand and

enhance broadband implementation efforts across the country.

Several interviewees took an even more proactive approach, "shift federal funding and investment that may have previously been 'private sector subsidy-based,' such as universal service funding, over into programs that are aligned with community broadband initiatives and their leaders, recommends Greg Richardson. According to Richardson, this realignment would "stimulate public-private cooperation at a local level, specifically encouraging 'corporate social responsibility' on the part of the private partners that local government may work with." Harold Feld, Media Access Project's Senior Vice President, would certainly agree, "I would shift to a focus on user empowerment away from the traditional model which emphasizes compelling or incenting large providers to provide service -- create programs designed to diffuse technical knowledge and equipment within underserved communities and policies to empower local communities to self-provision."

Generally speaking, broadband access is seen as only one facet of the problem of digital exclusion. However, more holistic solutions are often seen as outside of the purview and responsibilities of Internet Service Providers. Angela Stuber, Executive Director of Grassroots.org, places the onus on national decision-makers. According to Stuber, in addition to expanding the availability of broadband, lawmakers and regulators should be funding digital literacy programs, educating the general public, and "ensuring government websites are available to all with due consideration given to accessibility and download speeds." For Stuber, not only should we expand thinking about digital inclusion in terms of geographic, class, and racial disparities, but we also need to address current discrimination against constituents with motor skill, sight, hearing and other disabilities.

Matthew Rantanen, Director of Southern California Tribal Technologies, shares this critique and points to the general lack of technical savvy amongst decision-makers as part of the problem, "national policy-makers should be more aware of the opportunity that the wireless networks around the country are creating. There should be a willingness to attend and participate in discussion at key meetings." Catherine Settanni, Founder and Executive Director of the Digital Access Project, sees a need to "reinstate federal grant programs that specifically support digital inclusion efforts." According to Dr. Arun Mehta, President of the Society for Telecommunications Empowerment, policies need to "encourage community networks, but insist that the facilities must be available to all sections of society."

Often, key decision-makers have seemed out of touch with the needs of local community members. As Laird Brown, one of the organizers for the upcoming AirJaldi Community Wireless Summit in Dharamsala, India puts it, "sometimes people get hung up on their own preferences and lose sight of end-users. I think the best initiatives blend bottom-up requirements with top-down expertise. The best projects start with community need and then manage to fulfill it."

This problem exists, not just at the local level however, "all too often National leaders and organizations become exclusively focused on decisions made within the beltway. Certainly the law of the land is important, but many decisions are being made at local and state level -- interpretations and implementations of the law of the land," remarks Michael Maranda, President of the Association for Community Networking.

What do local decision-makers often overlook?

Becca Vargo Daggett, Director of the Municipal Telecommunications Project at the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, points out the need to shift basic perceptions about broadband service provision, "I want

people to change the way they think about communications technologies. I support public ownership of network infrastructure because that allows cities to make choices that fit their communities." In terms of business models, Daggett is relatively agnostic, preferring that a wide array of options be considered -- "that might mean charging most users \$15 or \$20 per month. It might mean treating Internet access like the public libraries -- a free amenity for everyone; or public transportation -- a very low-cost service for everyone."

To date, some business models and municipalities have faced a substantial backlash from incumbent ISPs, though more and more of these ISPs have now joined the municipal and community wireless movement. Annie Collins, Founder and Chairwoman of Fiber for our Future, cautions communities to be vigilant against anti-muni propaganda from these corporations, "I believe local policy makers most often overlook the flack they will receive from the Telcos and the Cable Companies for trying to take charge of their digital destiny and economic development. When a push poll comes out from the incumbents, the policy makers must squash any misinformation by addressing it head-on and educating voters with facts."

Often, one need look no further than the local community to find valuable resources and expertise to help get the truth out, as Richardson mentions, "most communities have brilliant leaders involved in nonprofit and other community efforts, and their knowledge goes well beyond what exists with local government staff, consultants, services providers, etc. This is an untapped resources." Rantanen agrees, pointing out that local knowledge is too often ignored, "I think that local decision-makers overlook the community itself." So how can local decision-makers avoid this mistake?

According to Feld, seeking community input and local expertise at an early stage is particularly important to ensuring the success of the initiative -- without outreach and "substantive community involvement throughout," unrealistic expectations multiply. Yet many municipal decision-makers have been loath to shift power to the communities the networks serve. Even though, Feld points out, "Studies consistently show that community broadband deployments are most successful when they are championed by a leader within the community."

"I worry that the balance of financial obligations, city contracts, and public pressure seem to create a caustic environment for anything more than superficial community engagement in a developing wireless network," says Hannah Sassaman, Coordinator of the Prometheus Radio Project. "Representatives of local nonprofits and community service providers are a great start, but decision-makers need to make room for growth of those representatives, and allow their network to be not just shaped by, but truly owned by, the communities who need to use it."

In answering the question of why communities create wireless networks, it is good to focus on the big picture. "Investment in human and social capital and the capacity of organizations; the political and economic dimensions of ownership models, and network topology... these are normative questions on the social contract between the Public and the near-monopolies entrusted with build-out and operation of our communications infrastructure," says Maranda. "It amazes me that we don't take communications policy more seriously as an issue central to our political life and the well-being of the Republic and our democratic values."

Though local decision-makers all too often overlook both the level of local expertise in their own communities and the national political-economic framework in which they operate, this is only one facet of the problem of creating digitally inclusive initiatives. It is generally agreed that digital inclusion

is a positive and vital goal for municipal broadband efforts. However, if, as experts around the globe have stated, community involvement and shared control over these efforts fosters digital inclusion, then what are the factors slowing things down? In Part III of this series we'll explore barriers and solutions to effective digital inclusion initiatives.

This article is part of a three-part series on digital inclusion. Bellsouth and Comcast declined comment for this series. Repeated e-mails and phone calls seeking comment were not returned by Earthlink, Insight, Qwest, and Verizon. AT&T responded only that it "is committed to making affordable broadband service available to as many homes and businesses as possible. We believe the best policy is to stimulate private investment in broadband."

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