

## #8 National, State and Local Broadband Policy: Getting Involved.

Moderator: Chuck Sherwood, Community Media Visioning

Speakers: Christopher Mitchell, Institute for Local Self Reliance

Lauren-Glenn Davitian, CCTV Center for Media and Democracy, VT.

Charles Benton, The Benton Foundation.

Chuck Sherwood served as moderator. He told the story of Kenyetta Cheese who used to be the IT guy for Manhattan Neighborhood Network. They were at a conference and Kenyetta, a speaker on a panel, appeared at the session live from a nearby public park using the city's Wi Fi network and a digital camera. Providing a simple and direct demonstration of the power of community broadband networks, whether wireless or wireline.

### **Chris Mitchell from Institute for Local Self Reliance (ILSR)**

A new report by the Institute for Local Self-Reliance argues that a publicly owned information infrastructure is the key to healthy competition, universal access, and non-discriminatory networks.

"Localizing the Internet: Five Ways Public Ownership Solves the U.S. Broadband Problem" notes that high speed broadband is becoming ever more widespread.

Many telecommunications companies are offering to build a citywide wireless or even wired network at little or no upfront cost to the city. That arrangement is especially attractive to local elected officials who fear that government lacks the expertise to manage a high tech network and who worry about the possible impact on their budget. "This is an excellent time to remember to look that gift horse in the mouth," maintains Becca Vargo Daggett, the report's author and the director of the Institute's Telecommunication as Commons Project.

In the report, they highlight five arguments for public ownership.

#### *1. High-speed information networks are essential public infrastructure.*

Just as high quality road systems are needed to transport people and goods, high quality wired and wireless networks are needed to transport information. Public ownership of the physical network does not necessarily mean the city either manages the network or provides services. Cities own roads, but they do not operate freight companies or deliver pizzas.

Information networks are technologically sophisticated and the technologies involved are rapidly evolving. However, fiber optic cables are to this century what copper wires were to the last, and their capacity is essentially unlimited. While wireless networks are experiencing rapid advances, the initial investment is so low and the payback period so short that rapid upgrades are part of both private and public business plans.

#### *2. Public ownership ensures competition.*

A publicly owned, open access network can be open to all service providers on the same terms, thereby encouraging the entry of new service providers. Customers can choose broadband service providers according to the combination of price, speed and service that fits their needs. This is particularly important given that consolidation in the telecommunications industry and a hands-off policy by the federal government have combined to lessen competition among private suppliers.

Cities establishing new, privately owned citywide networks can require the owner to allow fair access. But it is unclear whether these contractual obligations will be enforceable in the future.

### *3. Publicly owned networks can generate significant revenue.*

Telecommunications networks are different from traditional public works like roads because they can be self-financing both in terms of initial construction costs and ongoing upgrades. They can also generate revenue for local government, reduce the cost of government services, or keep more money in residents' pockets with lower prices.

### *4. Public ownership can ensure universal access.*

Publicly owned road, water and sewer, and sidewalk networks connect all households without discrimination. All have access to the same services, though they may purchase different amounts. Private companies, on the other hand, have incentives to upgrade their networks only where it will be the most profitable.

### *5. Public ownership can ensure non-discriminatory networks.*

With publicly owned networks, customers can be sure that any traffic management mechanisms are necessary and not simply to improve profitability. Communities can insist on neutrality from any service provider that uses the network. Or, if the market is large enough to support multiple service providers, a publicly owned network can leave neutrality to the market, knowing that unhappy customers can easily change service providers.

## **Lauren-Glenn Davitian, CCTV Center for Media and Democracy, VT.**

Lauren has dedicated more than 20 years of public service in promoting community-access television in Vermont. She was one of the founders of Vermont's public-access movement. Today, there are 25 "access centers" throughout the state operating 42 different public-access channels, including three in the Burlington area alone. Of the more than 120,000 cable households in Vermont, nearly all are served by an access center that provides a range of media services.

Lauren told the audience that the time has come for PEG centers to become a catalyst to encourage public ownership of telecommunication networks.

For example, Burlington, Vermont, has been building a community network. Like many municipalities across North America, it has decided to construct an advanced fiber network on its own. The AFN is being deployed first to support city services. Then, as part of the four-phase project, this municipality of just 40,000 will extend blazingly fast Internet service to businesses and residences.

The City of Burlington, like many other small cities and towns around the USA, has decided to ensure that all of Burlington's citizens and business have the up-to-date telecommunication services they need by building a municipally owned 21st century fiber optic infrastructure.

By the end of 2008 this infrastructure will pass every home and business in the City and will be able to carry virtually unlimited amounts of traffic and services. As such, this network will be the "electronic public road" system of the future, capable of delivering all the services that are rapidly appearing and which will be basic to the lives and economy of communities in the coming decades.

Although we are a City Department, this network is privately financed and clean of any taxpayer contributions. To pay for the effort, Burlington Telecom will provide the three basic services itself: cable TV, telephone, and high-speed Internet. But anyone else will also be free to use the network to deliver these or other services. (This is similar to a City providing public roads while also providing basic bus service as well. Citizens and businesses can use the bus service or they can use the roads to provide their own transportation.)

We believe that the citizens of Burlington deserve to have such open and universal access to a telecommunications network with sufficient capacity and flexibility for the foreseeable future at a reasonable cost. We will strategically and efficiently roll out BT's services to the community in a consistent, cost-effective manner with an emphasis on quality customer service. Here are our goals:

1. to provide the highest quality telecommunication services available
2. to provide superior customer service and technical assistance
3. to provide a single, easy-to-read bill for all your services
4. to be competitively priced if not cheaper than our competitors

### **Charles Benton, Benton Foundation**

The Benton Foundation released a new report which shines a spotlight on media that go beyond the standard notions of media in the public interest to embrace practices that increase citizen participation in media production, governance, and policy. The report summarizes the findings of a nationwide scan of effective and emerging community media practices conducted by the Benton Foundation in collaboration with the Community Media and Technology Program of the University of Massachusetts, Boston. The scan includes an analysis of trends and emerging practices; an online survey of community media practitioners; one-on-one interviews with practitioners, funders, and policy makers; and the information gleaned from a series of roundtable discussions with community media practitioners in Chicago, Boston, Minneapolis/St. Paul, and Portland, Oregon. <http://www.benton.org/index.php?q=node/6172>

Mr. Benton played a video from the Community Media Summit that was held in Chicago in June. Co-sponsored by the Benton Foundation, the Chicago Community Trust and the Chicago Digital Access Alliance. Recent studies indicate that 29 percent of U.S. households do not have Internet access, that's around 31 million homes. Even though in 2004 Pres Bush set a goal for universal and affordable broadband access by 2007.

On April 23, 2007, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) released their latest semi-annual broadband penetration rankings, which revealed that the United States had fallen to 15th place among the 30-member nations, down from 12th place just six months earlier.

Over 400 American cities have attempted to develop a municipal broadband network. They have faced strong and consistent opposition from private industry who oppose public sector providing any services provided by private industry. He suggest that Broadband deployment should fall within the universal service fund now dedicated just for universal pots (plain old telephone system).

When asked is there a role for wireless in a wireline broadband network. Yes of course, but recognize that standard Wi Fi is not capable of delivering the same signal capacity as a fiber based system. The fact is that Wi Fi technology has been oversold. In reality the capacity just isn't the same. Although Wi-Max does have a higher capacity. It is a user licensed spectrum but he believes it is only transitional.

The Internet developed as a client server model. But peer-to-peer network model is more robust, although it is not supported by most cable operators. They offer an asymmetrical low upload high download capacity system. Unlike an asymmetrical network that can provide 2 Mbps in both directions.

The Vermont Broadband Council website offers steps to create a community broadband network. The National Rural Telecommunication conference will be held in Springfield Ill in Oct 2007. <http://www.vtbroadband.org/>

Mr. Benton pointed out that the U. S. House is an urban based collective which is population-based demographic only 25% of the total membership comes from a rural environment. Unlike the U. S. Senate which is strongly based in the rural environment due to rural states being equally represented.

Web sites

<http://www.ilsr.org/>

<http://www.cctv.org/> CCTV's Center for Media & Democracy

<http://www.burlingtontelecom.com/>

<http://www.benton.org>

<http://www.newstips.org>

<http://www.accesschicago.org/> Chicago Digital Access Alliance

[http://www.freepress.net/docs/shooting\\_the\\_messenger.pdf](http://www.freepress.net/docs/shooting_the_messenger.pdf)