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McClure: Educate, Not Regulate, To Close Broadband Gap

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By Dave McClure

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The debate over national broadband policy nearly always centers on issues of the broadband infrastructure - what types of broadband are available, at what speeds and at what costs. And all too often, that debate is driven by rhetoric and distortions rather than by facts.

With overall home broadband penetration breaking 50 percent, the Pew Internet and American Life Project noted in a September 2007 survey that broadband was adopted by a majority of consumers faster than any previous technology. Broadband took 10 years to break the 50 percent adoption level, followed by the CD player at 10.5 years, the VCR at 14 years, cell phones at 15 years and color TVs and personal computers at 18 years.

In early 2008, I conducted a review of rural broadband to determine what national policies, if any, would best help to stimulate the growth of broadband in the United States at the fastest possible pace and for the lowest possible cost. The results, published this month by the U.S. Internet Industry Association, were startling.

As of 2008, virtually every U.S. household and business has access to broadband, and even in many rural areas has a choice of broadband technologies - fiber, wireless, cellular, cable DSL or satellite. While there is still work to be done to upgrade and enhance these choices, broadband deployment is active, vibrant and successful.

Why, then, are we subjected almost daily to a litany of complaints that the United States is lagging the rest of the world, that our broadband policies have been a failure and that the only remedy is massive government intervention and regulation? There are three major reasons:

- We're confusing broadband deployment (making broadband available to consumers) with broadband adoption (consumers actually subscribing to broadband services). We measure adoption rates, and then make sweeping and massively incorrect conclusions about deployment.
- The data are old. In the past two years, the deployment of broadband over fiber, wireless, cellular and satellite has been nothing short of breathtaking. DSL and other landline broadband services continue at an amazing pace. Yet these accomplishments are

ignored because policymakers are looking at data that is two to five years old - before this broadband push kicked in.

- The data are deliberately distorted and misrepresented for political purposes. This is generally done to promote government regulation of networks and network operators, as is the case with "network neutrality" initiatives and more recent calls for regulation of network management practices.

The reality is this: Any "digital divides" that exist in the use of broadband and Internet services in the United States are based on lagging adoption, not lagging deployment. Regulating broadband networks, therefore, will have little or no impact on the efforts to close these divides.

That doesn't mean that the federal government has no role in the growth of broadband. There are still issues related to expansion and enhancement of the networks. It's still a priority to move as rapidly as possible to better, faster and more economical broadband services. But the data are clear, compelling, and growing that the problem is with adoption rates, not deployment rates.

Literacy, computing skills and the availability of computers are the core issues of broadband growth in America today, along with the need for new content and applications that will entice consumers to make the Internet integral to their lives.

We won't reach the potential of the 21st century by imposing regulatory regimes from the 19th century on our broadband networks. We'll get there through better education, better access to tools with which to access the Internet and more compelling content to use in our daily lives.

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