

Internet access - a right or a privilege?

July 1, 2010 | [Mike Roe](#) & [Patt Morrison](#) | KPCC

A man looks at an advertisement on his laptop computer in Los Angeles on November 30, 2009.

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There's a growing debate over whether the Internet is a public tool, or the domain of private enterprise for generating profit. Monday, President Obama signed a memo committing the government to expanding broadband access.

Finland, starting today, has [given every citizen the legal right to a 1Mbps broadband connection](#), with providers required to make those connections available to all citizens. Finland is also working to get every citizen a 100Mbps connection by 2015.

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Obama pointed out the advantage that widespread Internet access gives to other nations. The United States government has not committed to an ambitious public Internet plan like Finland.

"Basically, my tax money would be going to support delivering pornography to people," said John in Fullerton, a caller to [KPCC's "Patt Morrison,"](#) explaining why he didn't want public-funded broadband access. "Whether it's racially biased content, or hate speech, I don't want to support that kind of content over a public network."

Sunne McPeak, president and CEO of the California Emerging Technology Fund, countered that it's imperative for United States citizens to have broadband access in order to be globally competitive.

Caller Derek also responded to John, saying, "Paying for broadband is not paying for their pornography. It's more like paying for a public road that someone could then drive on and buy pornography."

"There is a tug and pull" between cable and phone companies on one side and those who want more broad public access, said Norm Mineta, former congressman and secretary of transportation and commerce, now head of a California Emerging Technology Fund advisory board on broadband access.

"Many of our competitors [around the world] are pouring money into this whole issue of broadband accessibility," said Mineta, "because there is a relationship between accessibility and the capability of the students, as well as the productivity of their economies." Mineta stressed the importance of broadband to prevent the United States from falling behind in the global economy. Mineta talked about countries like Japan being ahead of the United States due to their significantly greater access to broadband.

McPeak talked about the different background the United States has compared to a nation like Finland. "You have a different history in our country of the private sector deploying the technology and consumers wanting more and more of it."

Right now, over 90 percent of Californians could access broadband, but only 62 percent use the Internet at home. Some factors or why more don't use the Internet include language barriers and cost. McPeak's organization is pushing for 80 percent using broadband by 2015.

Mineta talked about making computers available to those making under \$40,000, the disabled and members of minority groups, including non-English speakers.

McPeak explained that one strategy for reaching these new communities was by making computers available to schools, and letting students take those computers to use at home. They also are offering training to those parents to show them why they should be interested in using the Internet. This also helps those who can't afford computers.

There are also efforts to offer lower cost broadband access, as well as free trials. One motivator for parents to get online – seeing their kids' homework and grades on the

computer.

Another route being pursued is talking to public housing utilities about getting broadband into those units. It's relatively cheap to set up a local area network in public housing for the use of its residents.

McPeak pointed out that there are still 40,000 square miles of California that don't have access to broadband, which includes 1.4 million people.

jscottu

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There is no debate among people who have a clear philosophical understand of the concept of "rights". True individual rights do NOT impose an obligation on others except the obligation to refrain from violating your rights. If individuals have a "right to a trip to Disney World" then other must pay for those who can't afford it. But you DO have a right to "seek or pursue a trip to Disney World". The same applies to the internet. I assure you that if the government gets involved in "expanding internet access" the the cost of internet service will go up (although many of the costs will be hidden taxes).

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