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How should we define broadband, or High Speed Internet?

Definition: A measure of connectivity benchmarked against the top, top five, and top ten competing countries. It should include measures of upper bound and actual speed, symmetry in capacity, and price per speed unit measured. It should include a separate measure for Internet capacity and utilization in business and research.

Rationale: Measures of broadband are used to set and assess broadband policy goals and outcomes. A low bar sets the United States on a low trajectory. A self-referential bar, that considers only where we have been, how far we have come, and what currently-conceived consumer services we can serve well, but not how we compare to competitors, will systematically mask strategic decline.

High Speed Internet constitutes strategic infrastructure that goes to the core of American competitiveness and innovation. Measures that are too low, or purely internal, risk masking a gradual decline in American competitiveness. The Polish Cavalry, no matter how well outfitted as cavalry, was no match for German tanks in 1939.

Explanation: Current measures mask shortfalls when they include primitive speeds, like 200kbps downstream. The recent FCC practice of eliciting information about speed tiers is a first step in the right direction, but sets an artificially low benchmark by offering only internal comparison to existing services: how many lines are below 2.5Mbps, how many below 10Mbps, etc. This practice is sometimes coupled with defining goals in terms of consumer service types supported, such as VOIP or video. This modality of analysis is backward looking: it identifies needs based, at best, on existing or near-existing services that stretch the limit of present infrastructure, however primitive by comparison to known present alternative technological states of equivalent infrastructure.

In June of 2007, there were 21,700 lines in the United States that offered speeds equal to or better than the average published offered speeds in Japan. There were an additional 92,000 lines that offered speeds equal to or better than the average speeds available France, Korea, and Sweden. That is, 0.1% of households that have broadband had service that was equivalent to the average speed offered by providers in our leading competitors. About 4% of lines in the United States provide capacity equivalent to the average offered capacity in the remaining top 10 countries. Monthly subscription prices for the highest tier service in the U.S. range from 30% higher to almost four times as high as the highest speed tiers in those competitors that have deployed higher speeds: A sure sign of competition driving innovation, pricing, and adoption. (FCC & OECD data).

Only a country that sees High Speed Internet as a consumer service would permit itself to slip to the second decile of countries in terms of actual availability and deployment. We cannot afford to set our goals based on a definition of targets that extrapolates from the performance of a weakly competitive market, and treats the object of analysis as a consumer service rather than a core infrastructure of innovation and productivity.