



## **So We Might See Coalition Bring Betty Broadband Background Policy Briefing Paper**

*As adopted in the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 19:*

*Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.*

As the UN declaration explains above, the right to disseminate and receive information is an essential human right. A poll by the BBC in March 2010 demonstrated that 4 out of 5 people in 26 countries around the world consider the Internet to be a “fundamental right.”<sup>1</sup> It is a right that helps to define ourselves as human beings and political actors, helping individuals to participate and define in one’s own culture and identity. In addition, in the modern economy, access to communication and information is essential to promote economic justice.

Increasingly in the U.S., and across the world, the fundamental right to communicate means Internet access. And not just any Internet access—high speed Internet access.

### **What is Broadband?**

Broadband is high speed Internet access. Services that offer broadband are cable Internet and DSL from a telephone company. Slower access is dial-up over a telephone line. While most Americans used to access the Internet over a traditional telephone line, today using a dial-up modem makes going online virtually impossible (as our Betty found out!). Today Internet web sites use complicated graphics, files are larger, and even email relies on constant connectivity for web-based functions. Not having broadband is almost like not having the Internet at all.

### **Who has high speed Internet and who doesn't?**

Over the past years, there have been many efforts to increase the number of people on line. This hard work has been somewhat successful—today about 63 percent of Americans, 75.8 million people—have high speed Internet at home. Unfortunately, while broadband access could be a great opportunity to catch up, the groups who are most challenged are also left behind on the Internet.

A special census data report from October 2009 show that 40 percent of Americans are not online at home, and 32 percent are not online at all.<sup>2</sup> Broadband access varies widely with income, education and race. Almost 89 percent of households with income over \$150,000 have broadband, while only 35 percent of households with income of less than \$25,000 do. For households with people 25 years and older in 2009, 84 percent of those with college degrees had broadband access at home. In contrast, only 28 percent of those householders with less than a high school diploma had such access. Sixty-six percent of whites have access at home, while only 40 percent of Hispanics and 48 percent of Blacks have access.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> BBC, “Internet access is a ‘fundamental right’” (March 8, 2010) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8548190.stm>.

<sup>2</sup> National Telecommunications and Information Agency, Digital Nation: 21<sup>st</sup> Century America’s Progress Toward Universal Broadband Access, (February 2010) at 4.

<sup>3</sup> Digital Nation, pp. 5-7.

## Why is Internet Access Important?

**Broadband and our Communities.** Today, from everything to scheduling a special garbage pickup to driver's license renewal to voting locations are available on line. Without access to the web, parents cannot communicate with teachers or principals and children can't do homework assignments.

**Broadband and Economic Justice.** Without adequate Internet access, how does a person acquire job skills, employment information, education, and dialogue with potential employers or peer networks? Many employers require online applications. Unfortunately, jobs that are more likely to support a family or offer health benefits are more likely to be found on line.

**Broadband and Equal Access to Health Care.** Our country is currently debating the use of new technologies in a variety of arenas. For example, successful health care reform will rely in part on moving health care records to an electronic platform.

## What are the roadblocks and challenges of life off line?

For 24 percent of people in rural areas, they have no access to broadband at all. The infrastructure has not been built to rural America.

For those in urban areas and all people with lower incomes, the reasons are more complicated. An overriding factor, naturally, is cost. For example, the average cost of Internet access is \$41 per month, almost \$500 per year.<sup>4</sup> Another important reason is the lack of a computer or training to use a computer or the Internet.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, many Americans who do not have access say that they do not want it or don't need it. It can be a complex reinforcing challenge – some of this lack of interest is as a result of no exposure. Socioeconomic challenges can prevent someone from being online, which in turn leads to further marginalization and exclusion.

An in-depth study of low-income communities procured by the FCC illustrates the challenges facing a low-income person without Internet access.<sup>6</sup> Basic problems like the predictability of costs, understanding service options, and budget cuts for libraries and community centers are significant barriers to lower income people. Many large employers like Family Dollar and Wal-Mart focus on job applications on the Internet. Often, these companies estimate that such an application could take up to 40-60 minutes to complete online, but that exceeds the time available at libraries' public computers.

Moreover, the American Library Association has identified at least 5 states where unemployment benefits are only available online, but social service providers often consider home-based Internet access a luxury.<sup>7</sup> Libraries offer access, but they also often impose use limits of 30 to 60 minutes and wait times of an hour or more for Internet access. Interviewees described moving from library to library or computer to computer over the course of an afternoon to complete an important project.<sup>8</sup>

## Concerned? Want to do more?

Visit [www.bringbettybroadband.org](http://www.bringbettybroadband.org) to take action!

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<sup>4</sup> SSRC, Daily *et al.*, Broadband Adoption in Low Income Communities (March 2010) at p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> Digital Nation, pp. 12-14.

<sup>6</sup> SSRC, Daily *et al.*, Broadband Adoption in Low Income Communities (March 2010) at p. 17-19.

<sup>7</sup> SSRC, Daily *et al.*, Broadband Adoption in Low Income Communities (March 2010) at 23-24.

<sup>8</sup> SSRC, Daily *et al.*, Broadband Adoption in Low Income Communities (March 2010) at p 30-31, 44-48.