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Panelists Break Down Broadband Availability, Adoption Issues

The COVID-19 pandemic has only further highlighted that there is a lot more work to be done, and many missteps made in the past few decades that need to be corrected, in order to expand the availability and adoption of broadband services, panelists said today at the Technology Policy Institute’s virtual Aspen Forum.

Larry Irving, principal at the Irving Group and a former head of the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, argued that not enough progress has been made to ensure all Americans have access to, and can afford, Internet service since the first U.S. government report about the digital divide was released 25 years ago.

“Looking back at 25 years, I would have bet any amount of money we wouldn't be where we are today,” Mr. Irving said. “I would not have bet that 5% of rural families would not have access to broadband because they’re not connected. And I certainly wouldn't have bet that we’d still have roughly 20% of American families [without] access to broadband because they can't afford it.”

The government “made some tactical errors” early on that would have set the country on a better path to ensuring that people in rural areas, poor consumers, and people of color were able to access the Internet, he said.

That led to the situation today where there are millions of Americans without broadband service and devices to access the Internet, Mr. Irving said.

“It’s unconscionable,” Mr. Irving said, adding: “I got caught up in ‘Teletopia.’ I thought that when the market didn’t respond that we would make government policies that would. Unfortunately, the digital divide was politicized early on.”

The digital divide is now often thought of as being a rural issue, when it also affects low-income and minority communities in urban areas, as well, Mr. Irving said.

While the focus turned to providing service in rural areas, that left out many other parts of the country, he said.

“We have not come together as Americans,” Mr. Irving said.
Among other things, the government failed to heed the lesson from the Universal Service regime for landline service that people of color and/or poor Americans would be more likely to need assistance paying for Internet service than other populations, he said.

It was also a mistake to not include affordability as part of the conversation about where government programs should be focused, Mr. Irving said.

“I’m still optimistic that we’ll get there,” he said. "It's just a lot slower than it should have been."

But, Mr. Irving said, while the coronavirus pandemic has made the inequities caused by the digital divide even more pronounced, the situation has not resulted in both sides of the political aisle coming together to pass legislation that includes sufficient funding to solve the problem.

“A focused attention on this hasn't happened, even in the middle of a pandemic," Mr. Irving said, adding the FCC has “done almost nothing to address the pure poverty” that has resulted in millions of Americans not having broadband access.

Mr. Irving also argued there needs to be more attention paid to the “relevance” Internet service has for consumers, rather than just basing decisions on the speed of service available.

“You need to reach people where they are instead of where you want them to be,” he said, adding that different populations, such as people of color in low-income areas, might have different needs than populations in other areas, such as rural locations.

“Let’s try to think about these things in a way that’s not from ivory tower, that’s not theoretical, but from where the people are,” Mr. Irving said.

Mr. Irving also advocated for providing consumers larger monthly subsidies, perhaps $20 to $30 per month, to use for higher levels of broadband service than currently available through the Lifeline program.

In addition, he said, funding needs to be provided to help consumers afford Internet-enabled devices.

“If you can’t afford the device, you're not solving the problem," Mr. Irving said.

Greg Rosston, Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research director-public policy, contended there has been more effort, and money spent, on increasing access to the Internet in rural areas than there has been on addressing the problem of affordability in other areas.

“We are spending billions, literally billions of dollars on the access problem [in rural areas] for a small number of people, and we’re not spending much money at all on low-income programs, where you might be able to connect a whole lot more people who can’t afford [Internet service],” he said. "This is something that’s important."

Mr. Rosston argued in favor of providing more money than is currently allocated to offer larger monthly subsidies for low-income households so they could afford robust broadband service.
With the pandemic continuing, "These things matter more now," he said. "Let's put the money where it can make the most difference, which is where the most people are."

Kelly Gillis, Infrastructure Canada deputy minister-infrastructure and communities, argued that while affordability is important in dealing with increasing Internet use, availability is the first hurdle that needs to be overcome.

“You have to have access,” she said. “You can’t have affordability if you don’t even have access.”

As others said, Ms. Gillis commented that the pandemic has exacerbated the need for broader, reliable Internet access, especially in rural areas.

“Its importance has increased significantly and there's loud voices from all Canadians to make sure they have the technology they need,” she said.

Canada has allocated $5 billion (Canadian) to ensure that broadband services with download speeds of at least 50 megabits per second download speed and 10 Mbps upload speeds by 2030, she said.

Among other things, the government is providing $10 per month subsidies to low-income households, she said.

“We do need to close this gap very quickly,” Ms. Gillis said. "I don't think there's a magic bullet. But we have to address all three factors” of access, affordability, and digital literacy.

The Canadian government is also focusing on improved mapping to determine where there are gaps in broadband coverage, Ms. Gillis said.

Judith Mariscal, a professor and Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas executive director-Centro Latam digital, said Mexico has done a poor job of expanding Internet service.

“There has been money spent, but not enough,” she said, adding: “It hasn't even been a priority” for the Mexican government.

There was an overreliance placed several years ago on allocating spectrum that would be made available on a wholesale basis that was mismanaged and turned out to be insufficient, she argued.

“It's actually very depressing," Ms. Mariscal said. "There's been a lot of money spent ... and the network hasn't reached nearly what they were thinking."

Opensignal regulatory head Ceri Howes said there are a “large number of depressing” examples around the world of attempts to expand broadband availability and adoption.

In large part, the issue for the largest number of people is affordability, not availability of service, she said.

“The services aren't accessible because the price point isn't there,” Ms. Howes said, citing data that about 3.4 billion people have access to broadband service they cannot afford to subscribe to.
Making Internet service available using a pre-pay model has been one method that has enabled low-income people—who in many cases do not have bank accounts or identification documents—to obtain service, she said.

In addition, Ms. Howes said, policymakers should move away from basing regulations and programs on service speeds and instead determine what consumers need Internet access for.

“We really do need to be moving away from this obsession with speed, quite frankly, and move toward a more experiential model,” she said. “What do [consumers] need?” —Jeff Williams

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