

Roundtable Discussion Access to New Technologies and Services in Florida

Introductory Remarks
Johannes M. Bauer, Michigan State University

Information technology will continue to penetrate every aspect of modern society. In the near future, an ever-increasing range of services to consumers, including health care, education and government services will be delivered via electronic platforms. Likewise, more businesses will have to participate in electronically mediated value chains, either in B2B transactions with other businesses or in B2C electronic commerce with ultimate consumers. Access to advanced communication and information services is therefore a prerequisite to participating in and obtaining the benefits of the emerging information and knowledge-based society.

Whereas the central importance of information and communication technology would call for ubiquitous access to these platforms, the present pattern of availability and use reveals strong gaps between income, education, ethnic, and age groups as well as between regions (the often lamented “digital divides”). Throughout most of the twentieth century, public policies were in place to support universal service in the telephone industry. The emergence of new technologies has challenged these established principles. Since the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the legal and regulatory framework of the United States is premised on competition as the main driver of investment into advanced communications platforms. While universal service continues to be seen as an important goal, with the exceptions of schools and libraries and some health care services, it is presently limited to voice service and does not include any of the more advanced communications platforms, such as broadband access or high-speed wireless access.

Competition has had a powerful impact on the industry. Although the market share of competitive local exchange carriers has been growing only slowly, the new entrants have affected the business practices in the industry. The competitive fringe has spawned innovative service and pricing options and probably accelerated the introduction of new technologies. Digital cable networks, digital TV, WiFi, WiMAX, satellite-based services, or fiber to the home (FTTH) promise alternative communication platforms and might enable more robust competition in the future. New services, such as VoIP, IPTV, or P2P models, delivered on existing platforms, promise to weaken the dominant position of incumbent service providers and enhance robust competition. However, the availability of new technologies is dependent on finding a balance between the interests of incumbents, new market entrants and users.

In this roundtable discussion we will explore the visions and reality of access to advanced services in Florida as well as public and private sector initiatives to harness the benefits of the information age. Among the questions we will explore are:

1. What is the availability of “old” (fixed voice, cellular voice) and “new” (broadband, WiFi, WiMAX) communications technologies and services in Florida? Who has access to them and who has not?
2. What is Florida’s experience with competition in telecommunications? Has competition delivered ubiquitous access in the past and is it the most promising way forward? Will the emerging unbundling framework, endanger competition and have negative impacts on access? Or are incumbents handicapped by regulation, reducing their ability to respond to competition and dampening their incentive to invest in advanced technology?
3. What role can and should public policy (federal, state, local) play in facilitating access? Is there any role for the public sector to own and operate advanced communications infrastructure?
4. The U.S. has lost ground to other nations such as Korea, Canada, Sweden and has slipped from rank two to rank twelve in international comparisons of the adoption of fixed and mobile broadband access. What are the obstacles to faster adoption of broadband: inadequate availability of infrastructure, lack of content, or other factors? Will voice over IP become the “killer service” accelerating broadband adoption?
5. What privacy, security, and intellectual property issues need to be solved before the potential range of advanced applications can be unleashed?
6. Will access to advanced communications have potential downsides for communities? Does it facilitate outsourcing of activities that were hitherto difficult to outsource? Moreover, if everybody invests in advanced infrastructure, will it be sufficient to capture competitive advantages?
7. What complementary user skills are needed to take advantage of advanced telecommunications services? Is there a need to re-think K-12, college and lifelong education to equip individuals with the necessary knowledge and skills? What role do better business bureaus and trade associations play and what role could they play?

The roundtable discussion will provide ample opportunity for general discussion and to explore other issues that may be of interest to the participants.