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Broadband: Not for Kids Only



By Marty Kaplan

“It doesn’t matter if my parents have broadband or not — they’re just as clueless about a computer with a fast connection to the Internet as a slow one.”

The words came from a musician in his 20s, a well-educated African American who works with artists in hip-hop culture. He was one of seven of us sharing a table in the ballroom of the Radisson Hotel across the street from USC, and we were among a couple hundred people who turned out the other weekend for a Los Angeles town hall meeting about the future of the Internet.

As I drove to the meeting, Barack Obama was on the radio explaining how he intended to spend the massive economic stimulus package he was preparing. I heard him say it would go to improving the American infrastructure in a way that would eclipse even the building of the transcontinental highway system during the Eisenhower years, and that he’d invest billions in roads, schools, sewer systems, mass transit, dams, electrical grids and other public utilities. I heard him say he’ll be asking Congress to create green jobs, whose workers will build windmills, install solar panels, develop alternative fuels and retrofit homes with fuel-efficient heating and cooling systems.

But it was when he talked about broadband that he really got my attention. “It is unacceptable that the United States ranks 15th in the world in broadband adoption,” he said. “Here, in the country that invented the Internet, every child should have the chance to get online.” When it comes to infrastructure, the Information Superhighway isn’t just a metaphor any more.

What the president-elect didn’t say, though I learned it at the town hall meeting, was that America descended to our 15th-place standing during the Bush years, at the start of which we had been fourth. He might have added that broadband is way more expensive and way slower in the United States than in many other countries. The average broadband offering in Japan is 10 times faster than the average service available to U.S. consumers — at half the cost. People in countries like Finland, France, Korea, Sweden and Italy also pay less to get more.

Though Obama singled out children as particularly in need of access to the Internet, he could also have pointed to the economic, geographic and racial dimensions of the digital divide. While only 24 percent of American households earning more than \$50,000 per year are not connected to the Internet, nearly three times that amount — 65 percent — of homes with less than \$50,000 in annual income are not online. Nearly 60 percent of rural households don't subscribe to broadband. Fifty-five percent of white households have broadband, compared to 36 percent of black and 35 percent of Latino households.

I'd be thrilled if every kid in the country had broadband. Accomplishing only that would at the same time put a nice dent in the economic, geographic and racial disparities in high-speed access to the Internet. What troubles me is that it could have minimal impact on the Americans who aren't spring chickens — like the parents of my hip-hop tablemate who don't go online.

Don't get me wrong. I know people in their 90s who browse the Web and people in their 80s who are more adept at editing video online than I am. I know baby boomers who are on Facebook, much to their children's chagrin. I know many people who are not young enough to have grown up using computers, but who nevertheless read political blogs obsessively, upload pictures to Flickr, watch television clips on YouTube and television programs on Hulu, use Zillow to find out how much their houses are worth, get driving directions from Mapquest and Google the people their kids are dating.

But I suspect that the reason I know so many adults who depend on broadband is that most of the people I know are older and more educated and affluent and white than the majority of the country. At my table at the Internet for Everyone town hall, there was a librarian who described the stream of people who had no computer at home — who came to the library because they were told to apply for a job online but had no idea how to use a Web browser to do that and no e-mail address to put on their application. A Latina at my table, who works in Los Angeles' MacArthur Park neighborhood, described parents who have no idea how to help their children use a computer to do homework. These Americans are as important to our economic and civic life as everyone else.

What's the downside to focusing a national broadband build-out on schoolchildren? Sure, it'll prepare them for the future. But it's their parents who are being laid off and who need all the information they can get about job alternatives and emergency assistance. And it's their parents and grandparents who need the Internet to participate in political movements, to pry information out of governments and hold officials accountable, to give voice to community concerns and give reach to minority views. Like it or not, broadband has become the spine of our economy and the glue of our society, and every American adult who can't easily get online is as disenfranchised as every kid who doesn't have access to broadband is disadvantaged.

If you'd like to be part of the conversation that began at the Radisson, you can do it via an online forum — the Digital Town Hall at www.InternetforEveryone.org/townhall. The irony is how many people there are whose voices need to be heard who don't know their way from their elbow.