

1.1 PREFACE

The rapidly emerging development of open public local access networks in one form or another around the world suggests that, as of late 2005, this is a significantly 'hot topic' of universal relevance. We have every reason to believe that the temperature surrounding the generic subject of these networks is going to rise substantially over the coming months and years. This is not just another 'telecoms topic' for simplistic analysis or knee-jerk comment. Many hold that it is an issue of potentially pervasive impact and one of, if not the, vital keys to unlocking the 'golden age' which the digital technologies of the second half of the 20th century are widely regarded as having the power to deliver.

There is, however, a century of investment in concepts and conventional wisdom which are challenged by the underlying radical principles of 'openness' or 'network neutrality' at the heart of developments. Very strong vested interests are already arguing that the development of open public local access networks is unnecessary, unwise and potentially highly destructive in terms of the economic and social consequences they could have. There is evidence that they are already having recourse to litigation and seeking further to tilt public policy to inhibit their development. These voices are well articulated and highly audible. It is important that any public policy formulation on this issue is driven by evidence, facts and informed opinion. Despite the enormity of the topic and its rapid evolution, this study is aimed at presenting evidence, facts and informed opinion in a manageable and digestible form.

What cannot be denied from surveying what is happening on the ground with regard to local open access network development is that there is clear evidence that individuals and their communities, are beginning to taste and glimpse the unimaginable and unforeseen benefits from the development of such open local access infrastructure. At this early stage of the development of the this open network phenomena, much of this evidence is anecdotal rather than rigorously analytical, but that does not invalidate the apparent growing enthusiasm on the part of local political and other opinion leaders for open access infrastructure that deploys advanced high bandwidth digital technology.

It is ultimately a political decision as to whether these widespread local initiatives to develop open public local access networks should be supported, helped and encouraged or not. From this will flow public policy that will either be framed to stimulate and support such open access network development or to curb and seek to extinguish it. This point is highly relevant because of the fundamental nature of the underpinning technologies which have the potential to give power to the individual citizen to communicate with others, without let or hindrance, across boundaries and barriers that, in an earlier age, would have been capable of preventing this by state and regulatory control. Open access networks, we argue, go hand in hand with and re-enforce, an open and civil society. A state or community that seeks to hinder open citizen alliances or free speech will not look kindly upon the emergence of the open access network concept.

This Study is unequivocally aimed at helping those who, in an open society, are disposed to take an exploratory and positive questioning stance towards the potential development of open access networks and their ability to serve the social, economic and private needs of local communities and cities. It is not directed at assisting those who would resist or oppose them for some ideological reason or the protection of vested interests. Our experience to date has suggested that the key ingredient to the successful development and

deployment of open access local network infrastructure is visionary, informed and committed local political vision and will. Without this, there will be arguments and reasons aplenty from all manner of quarters, why the development of these open access networks is flawed, foolish or fatal – such arguments usually coming from quarters that are naturally inclined to resist their development for reasons of self interest.

Having said this, there is, as yet, no standard universal template or 'blue-print' that can be followed in order to assure the successful deployment of a local open access network and there may never be such a 'common standard'. However, we believe that it is likely that a portfolio of templates may begin to emerge as a result of distilling common patterns and procedures learned from the experience of others. But, at this early stage of development, in what is a radical approach to local communications, it is very much a matter of 'letting a thousand flowers bloom' and progressively deriving lessons and best practice by means of openly sharing knowledge and relevant learned experience. The development of the web-platform as an integral part of the infoDev Project Grant # 1258 "Municipal Broadband Networks" will be a powerful vehicle for delivering this shared learning and for permitting proven best practice templates to emerge through the natural market process. As will be argued below, we believe it would be entirely dysfunctional and counter productive to seek to formulate a precise and coded 'book of rules', templates or regulatory procedures for the emerging phenomenon of open public local access networks at this early stage of development. Any attempt to do so would invariably result in a greater concern for 'protecting what has gone before' rather than 'producing the invisible prizes of the future'.

It is our firm belief that considerable insight and understanding into what makes for positive public policy formulation in this area can be derived from undertaking rigorous analytical thinking – both inductive and deductive – rather than simply 'aping' what is happening in developed economies or from pursuing a process of public policy formulation that is primarily founded on a process of consultation of supposed "stakeholders". History suggests that in times of step-change development (or paradigm shift as it is popularly referred to) one age's 'stakeholders' are the next paradigm's 'stake-losers'. This will be further amplified and discussed below as we believe this to be a fundamental flaw in current public policy formulation which is hindering the full harvest of socio-economic benefit from the disruptive digital technologies that have the potential to deliver the much heralded 'golden information age'.

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