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Call for 'Universal' Broadband

Access to Broadband Internet is a Cornerstone to Make e-Health Meaning Full for Europe's Citizens.

On several occasions, EU Information Society Commissioner Viviane Reding has expressed "two main concerns". The first is that "broadband is not yet available to all. Deployment costs are high, particularly in distant and scarcely populated areas. In these circumstances, private operators often do not offer broadband because it is not profitable to do so."

Secondly, she points out: "The gap is not just about access. In rural areas, speeds tend to be lower and prices tend to be higher, discouraging use of advanced services."

The fast growth of broadband has led the European Commission to bring forward a review of the basic telecoms services Europeans can expect.

When a majority of EU citizens are using a telecoms service, EC rules dictate that it becomes one every European should be able to enjoy.

In countries such as Denmark, Luxembourg and Belgium, 100% of the population can get broadband if they want it. By contrast, 60% of Romanians cannot have broadband access. Furthermore, in countries such as Germany and Italy, the percentage of the population that is not covered by high-speed access is about 12%.

Figures from the EC suggest that from 2003-2007 broadband use in member nations tripled to 36% of households and had an annual growth rate of 20%. Despite this, said the EC, there were "striking gaps" among member states and the coverage their citizens enjoyed.

From 2003-2007 broadband use in the EU has tripled. However, 7 percent of the EU's population are still not connected (30% in rural areas).

So far, the EU has contributed to broadband growth by giving telecoms rules for more competition and investment. The EU also implemented a new system for mobile satellite services, which can offer broadband across the EU.

"High-speed internet is the passport to the Information Society and an essential condition for economic growth," said Viviane Reding, EU Telecoms Commissioner in a statement announcing the review. "This is why it is this Commission's policy to make broadband Internet for all Europeans happen by 2010."

The Commission has published a report showing that competitive markets for broadband Internet are providing EU citizens widespread and affordable access. However, further efforts are needed to ensure Broadband for All. So far, the EU has stimulated broadband with the following 3 tools:

Ó Telecoms rules for more competition and investment. Europe had almost 100 million broadband lines in January 2008 and a growth rate of 20%, with 52,000 new lines connected daily in 2007. In September, 2008 the Commission published further regulatory guidance on ensuring competition and investment for optical fibre net works.

Ó A new system to stimulate mobile satellite services, which can deliver broadband via satellite across the EU, was set up this summer. The European Parliament and the Council created a one-stop shop for authorising such services: instead of 27 procedures, mobile satellite operators now apply to the Commission.

Ó In November 2007, the Commission made proposals for reform of radio spectrum management to free resources for new wireless services, which were mostly endorsed by the European Parliament this September. If the Council also accepts this new form of spectrum management,
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the Digital Dividend – extra radio spectrum available after the move from analogue to digital TV – can be used for new wireless broadband services, and not just new TV channels.

Furthermore, it appears that the current EU's Universal Services Obligations (USO) could force telecoms firms to roll out their coverage to outlying areas that are not currently able to get the faster internet action.

The USO currently calls for all member states to offer 'functional internet access' which was taken to mean a line that can support 28.8 kilobits per second. Actually, in the modern connected world this dial-up rate is far from ideal, and with a rising number of EU households already enjoying broadband speeds the review of the USO may well be reworded to ensure that Internet access does not mean narrow-band.

Constant Monitoring

Close monitoring of broadband markets, taking into account all relevant factors, is crucial to provide a fair, reliable picture of how the broadband market evolves in each Member State and in the European Union. Extremely useful in the monitoring process is the Broadband Performance Index (BPI) that helps to compare broadband developments in EU countries so that policy making can target the real problems. The BPI has the following components:

- Ó Broadband coverage, reflecting developments in rural areas;
- Ó Competition by coverage, reflecting a country's innovative capacity, readiness to invest and consumer choice;
- Ó Available connection speeds, reflecting quality developments;
- Ó Prices, reflecting affordability; advanced communication technologies and services.
- Ó Use of advanced services, reflecting the willingness of individuals and businesses to take up innovative services and the perception of trust;
- Ó Socio-economic context, reflecting factors that summarise preferences, skills and available capital that influence the preparedness to use advanced communication technologies and services.

For more information, please visit: http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/index_en.htm

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