

NBP@4:
Surprises, Lessons, and Still in Beta

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Every time there's broadband related news—a court decision, a merger, a hearing—there's a spate of articles in which the people who thought the U.S. was doing badly five years ago say we still are and the people who five years ago said we were doing great say we still are.

A debate where everyone recycles five-year old sound bites is not a recipe for progress.

Moreover, those debates about international rankings all reflect decisions made long ago. What we need to focus on are the decisions we should make today to [lead in the future](#).

Turns out, in our plan, and in every national broadband plan around the world, there are four strategies that dominate:

1. Driving fiber deeper;
2. Using spectrum more efficiently;
3. Getting everyone online; and
4. Using the platform to improve delivery of public goods.

So the right question is are we improving in executing on those 4 strategies?

I'm a bit surprised, but delighted, that, on 1 and 3, we are doing better. Interestingly though, it's not due to federal government efforts but is largely due to private, non-profit and local government efforts. It may well be that on the 10th Anniversary, the greatest impact of the plan will turn out to be how the process seeded the [Google Fiber](#) and the Comcast Internet Essentials [effort](#).

On the fiber side, Google Fiber has sparked not just activities in nearly 40 communities, caused [pro-consumer competitive responses](#) and also inspired the efforts of others including [AT&T](#), [CenturyLink](#), [CSpire](#), and [Gig.U](#). Moreover, Google has lead to a learning exercise about how municipalities can improve the economics of fiber deployment. As a result, many, including AT&T CEO Randall Stevenson have discerned a sea change in municipal reactions to efforts to upgrade networks. As he noted "(c)ities and municipalities are beginning to hold up their hands and say we would like you come in and invest. And they're actually beginning to accommodate and tailor terms and conditions that makes it feasible and attractive for us to invest."

At the same time, and I believe related, a NBP recommendation ([8.19](#))

which I believed was important but thought had little political support, has become much more popular—that the federal government should act against state laws that put up barriers to municipal broadband. Prior to the plan, a number of states enacted such laws. Since then, the tide has turned with recent efforts to do so failing, the [FCC](#) becoming more engaged and there is even an effort in Tennessee to reverse previously enacted restrictions. Cities have become both more aggressive and more sophisticated about advancing their own bandwidth destiny. Indeed, the way in which cities have become the principal government jurisdiction delivering on the promise of the national broadband plan has caused the biggest change in my own thinking.

In short, what looked like a fiber-deprived desert a few years ago is starting to sprout. We are far from finished but one can be optimistic that in a few years we might have a gigabit garden. And with Chairman Wheeler adroitly jumpstarting the [Plan's call](#) for an [IP Transition](#)—something that, in contrast with the municipal issue, I thought would move much faster—perhaps federal policy may align to incent [bandwidth abundance](#), which holds promise for addressing a number of [policy concerns](#).

On the adoption side, Comcast is doing a terrific job and deserves praise for both increasing its program's momentum but also making it permanent. One reason they succeed is that like Google, they constantly learn and improve. One of the folks they are learning from is the smartest researcher in the space, John Horrigan. I'm delighted he is here to raise some important and previously over looked questions about [digital readiness](#).

One interesting question we will not know the answer to for awhile is which approach—Comcast's approach which focuses on special offers for low-adoption communities or Google's efforts, which create a broad low cost option of a one time \$300 fee for seven years of service—will do the most to address the adoption problem.

Some of my friends on the left criticize Comcast's efforts. Some of my friends on the left criticize Google's. I think they are both wrong. (I also have friends on the right who I think are wrong but on different subjects. And almost all my friends often think I am wrong. They are often right) I admire what both companies are doing; driving faster, better, cheaper broadband in ways that are sustainable. Having two different models is great. We don't have to choose one so let's not. Let's learn from both.

My criticism would focus on what the government is not doing. I gave a [speech](#) on this topic on the plan's first anniversary. I won't repeat it here, except to summarize by saying the government has many tools to improve how it delivers service to low adoption communities in ways that will also provide incentives to use broadband. This, I still believe, is fertile ground for further work.

The success of Google Fiber and Comcast in improving our county's performance is a far greater tribute to them than it is to the plan. In my book, those who allocate capital—whether financial, political, or other types—to address a problem deserve the praise and both companies have. It is worth noting however, that while the thrust of the planning effort was to make recommendations for changes in federal policy, there is significant value to planning efforts in simply sparking the right dialogue and that federal planning efforts should be open to non-federal government solutions.

Other areas, however, can only be addressed by federal government action. One such area is spectrum. [Chapter 5](#), on Spectrum, has to be seen as a great success. Not only did it correctly identify the need for diversity in allocations, with both licensed and unlicensed, it directly sparked a number of actions, including:

- The President's Executive memo stating the 500 MHz goal which caused NTIA to look for more spectrum and led to 1695-1710, 1755-1780, and 3.5 GHz being on the table;
- The only communications legislation passed in a recent Congress, on the Incentive auction (and subsequent FCC rulemakings) as well as directing an auction of certain bands identified in the NBP;
- Liberalization of MSS spectrum (S-band/AWS-4);
- Improvement of WCS spectrum;
- The current discussion of using 5 GHz for unlicensed;
- The discussion and possibility of action for a national TV White Spaces footprint in post-incentive auction guard bands

There are a number of people who deserve praise for moving this agenda forward, including then Wireless Bureau Chief Ruth Milkman and her deputy John Leibovitz, who both did the lion's share of the work in writing and then implementing the Chapter, and Larry Strickland and his team at NTIA. I also think Commissioner Clyburn, while she was Interim Chair, did a great job untying the Gordian note on a couple big issues, such as the 700 MHz interoperability [order](#).

Of course, we do not know the outcome of the incentive auction. I was personally glad to see Chairman Wheeler quickly and publicly state what everyone privately knew; that the previously announced date of 2014 for the auction was not going to happen. He was right to prioritize getting it done right over getting it done fast.

I also think that while we should aspire to recapture as much spectrum as the market will justify, that number is likely to be lower than the 120 MHz identified in the Plan. The final number will be a function of many factors, but primarily market forces. In my view any number above 60 MHz will be a significant improvement over a spectrum future that would never, as far as we could project in 2009, have a significant portion of lower band spectrum come on the market in a coordinated fashion.

The fourth bucket, improving the delivery of public goods and services, I will leave for other panelists, as their expertise is greater than mine. I am sorry that the change in date meant we do not have an opportunity to hear from Dr. Mohit Kausal, who not only did a great job writing the chapter on health care and broadband but also, along with others in his incredibly talented team, is out in the market, taking the vision and executing on the [opportunities](#) to use broadband to improve delivering healthcare.

I am delighted to be together again with others who delivered great work with the plan and continue to do so in their post plan work: John, who I previously mentioned; Rear Admiral Jamie Barnett, who laid the groundwork for the long-overdue [FirstNet](#) project; Steve Midgely who went on to write the Department of Education's [Tech Plan](#) and who in many ways helped catalyze the activities that lead to the FCC and others understanding that the E-Rate program required an [upgrade](#) ; and Nick Sinai, who implemented his own [green button energy data](#) recommendation when he moved to the Office of Science and Technology.

This leads me to a final thought. As I have seen here and in other countries where I have been consulted on broadband plans, in the long run, the execution of a plan is more important than the plan itself. Good execution can correct for any errors in the plan. A great plan with lousy execution will ultimately fail. As we said in the implementation chapter, "this plan is in beta and always will be." Good execution requires readjustment when facts change. And despite what others might think, I think that in the five years since we started the plan, a lot has changed.

I have previously expressed disappointment with how some policy leaders here viewed the ideas in the Plan through the lens of [one-day sound bites](#) instead of long-term policy, so it makes me particularly grateful that the ITIF is holding this event. This enables us to have a candid discussion of how we are executing and how we can learn something so that like, say Google or Comcast, our country can be stronger tomorrow than we are today.

Thank you.