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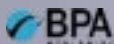
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PRESIDENT'S LETTER

Why The First Mile Is A 'Big Broadband' Idea

Think: New, community, innovation, local, and customer friendly



Getting excited about a mere phrase – in this case the phrase is “the first mile” – may seem odd. But when that phrase summons up a constellation of fresh perspectives, then our enthusiasm may be justified.

Some associate First Mile with the view that a telecommunications network is mainly a transport medium and that these days, intelligence resides at the network's edges, in the computers and other devices in the hands of end users. The concept also suggests that innovation occurs according to the desires of the consumer rather than the dictates of the owners of the network. In other words, you don't have to be a telecommunications company to participate and innovate. What you send upstream as a producer is no less important than the content you are receiving from afar, hence the First Mile emphasis on symmetrical bandwidth.

At the FTTH Conference in Las Vegas in early October, I found myself standing in a circle of First Mile pioneers. They included Kenneth Pigg of the University of Missouri, who helped early on to disseminate First Mile thinking by co-publishing a treatise entitled “First Mile Issues For Rural Broadband” and insisting on the use of the term. Also in the group was Susan Estrada, the dynamic founder of FirstMile.US. Just a few days earlier, she had welcomed onto her board such heavyweights as Jim Baller, a leading telecommunications lawyer, and Vint Cerf, whose title is Chief Internet Evangelist for Google. On joining First Mile, Cerf noted that it “focuses on creating demand for broadband – especially symmetric, low-latency and high-performance big broadband.” Cerf, widely known as one of the Fathers of the Internet, added, “I believe that the goals of FirstMile.US are exactly what our nation needs right now.”

In assessing the proliferation of the term First Mile, I found an online essay I believe sums up the concept well. It was written by Richard Lowenberg, an artist, tele-community planner and information ecology advocate. He writes: “I have long advocated the purposeful use of the term First Mile to represent the value of

networked local economies.” His essay includes the following passages:

“Most telecommunications service providers and government regulators refer to the home, office, neighborhoods and communities as the Last Mile. They indicate that providing Last Mile enhanced connectivity, especially in rural areas, is not economically viable. They have their economic models backwards. The greatest source of value in most people's lives is local, derived from self, family and community. In a globally networked and communicative society, local environments have the opportunity to aggregate and generate new economic resources, value and benefits. The local realm must be considered the First Mile.”

Lowenberg, who is executive director of the Davis Community Network, in Davis, CA, rl@radlab.com, warms to his topic. The commonly applied term Last Mile, he adds, “represents a supply-side driven concept. It is a top-down, national and corporate, technical and engineering perspective on telecommunications infrastructure deployment and services delivery. It is based on legacy hierarchical thinking, intent and actions.” By contrast, he writes, the First Mile view “is based on a demand-side driven understanding. It describes a . . . democratic social and economic perspective that focuses on the difference these systems and services will make in the quality of people's lives. The First Mile is rooted in realizations about the newly emerging ‘hyper-archival’ nature of networked economies, and local-global relationships and actions.” This passionate advocate concludes with the words, “the Information Revolution must ultimately be a people's revolution.”

Ultimately, we shall see. As for now, our editor-in-chief, Steven Ross, has assembled an issue highlighting First Mile thinking, which he authoritatively describes in his essay on page 6. Great job, Steve! Sounds to me like an idea whose time has come.

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