Chapter 22

Public Policies for Broadband Development in the European Union:
New Trends for Universalisation of Services

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ABSTRACT

The European Lisbon strategy considers that the generalised availability of broadband accesses is one of the European Union's greatest challenges. In this context, the EU member states have launched information society development programmes which dedicate major sections to fighting against the digital exclusion and plan the geographical extension of broadband accesses. In all of them, it is acknowledged the role of public policies in complementing the effective operation of the market, addressing both the supply and demand sides. The aim of this chapter is to review how the objective of generalised broadband deployment can be achieved, and what instruments the public administrations are using to pursue it. The chapter includes, in particular, a comparison of practical implementations of broadband development policies, their relationships with universal service obligations, and, finally, the implications of using this segmented approach.

INTRODUCTION

Realising the potential of the information society requires an adequate infrastructure to smoothly support the supply of contents and services. This is why achieving a fast and generalised broadband deployment is viewed by most governments around the world as an important challenge to their immediate future. It is also the case of the European Union, as proven by the various recommendations and action plans presented in the last years, all of them acknowledging the importance of broadband development as a critical issue for economic growth, productivity and competitiveness[1], and as a guarantee of social cohesion among the various European regions. According to the already concluded eEurope 2005 Action Plan, a "widespread availability of broadband access at competitive prices" would act as the enabler for the objectives summarised in the keystone of eEurope: "an Information Society for all" (European Commission, 2002). The next stage in the European Union's public policy towards the information society, the i2010 programme, confirmed this line of action (European Commission, 2005b). More recently, additional initiatives coming both from the Parliament (European Parliament, 2007) and the Commission (European Commission, 2006) have stressed and reiterated the importance of further broadband deployment. Indeed and to illustrate this fact, Commissioner for Information Society and Media, Viviane Reding, has stated that "broadband means better access to business services, faster and cheaper ways of doing business, overcoming the disadvantage of distance, attracting inward investment and retaining jobs"[2].

Investment in broadband, requiring a significant improvement of the existing infrastructures or even a new network deployment[3], will mainly come from the private sector. The public sector must help create a favourable environment for such investment to take place and stimulate demand. However, given the existence of regions, in particular rural areas, with no interest for private

initiative since they would represent no profit at all for them, governments must also consider taking action on the supply side of the market. In this context, the EU member states have already launched information society development programmes which dedicate major sections to fighting against the digital exclusion and plan, among other measures, the geographical extension of broadband accesses.

The aim of this chapter is, precisely, to review how this objective of broadband development can be achieved, and what instruments the public administrations are using.

The chapter starts by assessing the background importance of accessing advanced telecommunication infrastructures in the new socioeconomic paradigm of the information society; it is in the framework of the fight against the *digital divide* that public intervention for boosting the development of broadband should be examined. The following section provides a quick review of the different mechanisms traditionally used to guarantee generalised access to telecommunication services and identifies the reasons why, at least to date, the universal service obligations have not been extended (or have been only timidly extended) to advanced services. Finally, a full description of the tools used for universalisation in this new stage, studying the characteristics and specificities of the European broadband support programmes, is provided in the next section. The critical analysis is left for the conclusions with which this chapter ends.

BACKGROUND: ACCESS AS A MAIN CAUSE OF THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Two are the key factors on which actions should be taken to fight against the digital divide: *access*, that is, providing connection to the appropriate infrastructures, and *adoption*, or, in other words, encouraging their usage considering the social, economic and political characteristics of the

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