

Chapter XV

Social, Political, and Ethical Responsibility in Broadband Adoption and Diffusion: A German Case Study

Axel Schulz

De Montfort University, UK

Bernd Carsten Stahl

De Montfort University, UK

Simon Rogerson

De Montfort University, UK

ABSTRACT

There is considerable interest worldwide in broadband diffusion, with research focusing on aspects such as the provision of broadband in remote areas and the socio-economic factors that determine the likelihood of adoption. This chapter identifies the policies and initiatives used to encourage broadband awareness, availability, and adoption. Using the case study of a local broadband initiative in remote and rural Germany, the chapter asks the question of who can and should be responsible for broadband provision, and how such responsibility ascriptions are realized.

INTRODUCTION

National and international institutions across Europe and beyond encourage broadband adoption and coverage in rural areas. But often, on a local level, the broadband adoption does not take place. Broadband Internet is among the most important technologies in the telecommunication infrastruc-

ture market. Telephony and data transmission of all kinds will be provided and handled by broadband networks. Broadband is thus held to be a very important tool in order to take part in the knowledge and service society. But what if broadband is not available? This chapter will present a case study from East Germany where local authorities failed to take the demand for broadband seriously.

Using the theoretical lens of responsibility, this chapter will also present an explanation why the demand/supply model fails when free markets do not emerge/exist.

The chapter will concentrate on the question of responsibility for broadband. In order to explore what responsibility can mean in the context of broadband, we will start out with a discussion of the importance of broadband and technical infrastructures necessary for providing it. After briefly outlining the social and ethical relevance of broadband, we will describe the German broadband market. This will set the scene for the case study of AltmarkDSL.de, a case where market forces did not lead to the provision of broadband in a remote and rural area in Germany. In this case, broadband was eventually provided because of pressure exerted by the local public. We will use this case study to discuss the question of responsibility for and in broadband, and to explore the link between ethical, political, social, and other factors. The main aim of this discussion is to show that broadband can be understood as a social innovation in which technology is only one influencing factor among many.

SETTING THE SCENE: WHY BROADBAND IS IMPORTANT

Broadband is a technology that facilitates participation in the global information society. It enables the transmission of large amounts of data in short time. In the near future TV and telephony may be delivered by broadband infrastructures only. Other examples of its importance include the health or not-for-profit sector. Hospitals will send radiograms to foreign destinations via broadband connections. This will require doctors to be linked to a broadband connection. There is a range of other possible applications that cover all aspects of human life. What is important to note is that the political sphere has already recognized the importance of broadband.

Germany is one example. The German coalition parties formulated in November 2005 their coalition contract using the following words: “In

order to advance the industry and research position of Germany, the coalition parties will provide incentives for the set up of modern broadband telecommunication infrastructures.”¹ Furthermore, the European Union debates if broadband should get the status of a Universal Service Obligation (USO). “Universal service is a safety net for achieving social inclusiveness that is to ensure that basic communications services would always be available at a determined quality and an affordable price, even if the market would not provide them under normal commercial circumstances.” The EU defines universal service as a “minimum set of services, of specified quality to which all end-users have access, at an affordable price in the light of national conditions, without distorting competition.”² Thus, on an international and national level, the importance of broadband seems to be quite well recognized.

What Is Broadband?

The speed and the quality of the signal by which data is transmitted around the globe via the Internet has become a significant economical factor. The buzzword for the modern and fast transmission of data via Internet connection is broadband. Broadband transmission became the ordinary form of Internet connection. Many Internet applications do need in fact the availability of a broadband connection in order to be usable. The Internet is no longer a medium where scientists and young people share their thoughts, music, and videos. Instead, broadband is becoming an infrastructure for the many new industries and applications, a necessity for human life. Radiograms are nowadays transmitted via the Internet. The new form of telephony, called voice-over-Internet-protocol, is likely to become the new standard of how telephone calls are transmitted. In general one can say that the mass of data which will be transmitted by many new applications via the Internet will increase in the coming years. That is why it is important that people have access to new information infrastructures like broadband.

Technically an Internet connection can be described as ‘broadband’ if the bandwidth for data

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