

2007 Policy Forum & Susan G. Hadden Pioneer Awards Luncheon

Friday, February 9, 2007

11:45 a.m. - 1:45 p.m.

National Press Club, Washington, DC

Charles Benton
(prepared remarks)

Thank you. Thank you, Chairman Markey, for that kind introduction.

For more than 200 years, Americans have approached the future the same way that Huck Finn looked at the bend in the river: even though we didn't know for sure what was coming next, we always had a sense of limitless possibility about where we are going and where it could take us. The leaders whose ideas have changed the world are the ones who have been able to see around that bend, to catch a glimpse of the future, capture its potential, and help ensure that all Americans can partake.

I can't think of anyone who has done that more successfully than Chairman Markey. For over 30 years in Congress, Chairman Markey has been a steadfast leader in helping us meet the challenges of our day in communications policy. You have had a vision of the future that includes time-honored American values – localism, diversity and consumer choice. And you provide the leadership that keeps the public interest at the heart of communications policy. You are the true champion of expanding choices and voices in the digital age.

[pause to applaud Markey]

I am honored to be here today and to accept the Susan G. Hadden Pioneer Award. Professor Hadden, tragically killed 12 years ago, passionately argued that ordinary people can understand the issues related to changing technology and that every citizen needs access to communications tools if our democracy is to remain vibrant and fair. It is very humbling, indeed, to accept an award bearing her name. For to inherit her legacy is to raise up the torch that champions the right of underserved communities to have access to the new communications technologies and to show how vital it is that every citizen be connected to the social and political resources being developed in the new telecommunications environment.

Today, as we reach a new bend in the river, we must once again strive to look around the corner in order to harness the full power and potential of what the future may bring. We have never before seen a river of opportunity as expansive or swift as the data that flows over the broadband Internet. The opportunities are potentially endless and as significant as the invention of steam power and electricity that have fueled American prosperity at earlier junctures. But America's digital prosperity won't happen by accident, nor continue by inertia. It will only happen if we make pragmatic and smart choices about our communications future.

This digital river we call broadband is the tool that can quench our thirst for economic progress. But just as new technologies create more opportunity, they can also create more inequality. Like access to water and electricity, America must ensure that this new digital river reaches those who stand to benefit most at speeds that flow faster than today's trickles.

Before her death, the Benton Foundation had the great honor of supporting Professor Hadden's research. In a [working paper](#) we published in 1994, Professor Hadden outlined two alternative visions of our digital future. One future saw a world where people were merely consumers, empowered to more easily order pizzas or buy suits.

The alternative future saw people empowered to be producers – enabled to connect directly with others – enabled to create their own content and to share information – even movies – illustrating a problem they hoped people will take action on.

Can anyone say YouTube?

In short, Professor Hadden's preferred vision is one in which everyone is on the network, creating and sharing information with interested people.

But to get there, she believed telecommunications policy needed to play a role. In that 1994 paper Professor Hadden said, "we need to adopt a long-range goal that calls for expanded universal service."

Professor Hadden died during a time of great debate over our telecommunications laws, a debate that led to the Telecommunications Act of 1996. Visionaries – like Chairman Markey – guided us even then to a way to expand digital opportunity through modernizing universal service policy.

The Telecommunications Act of 1996 took an important first step in linking universal service and digital access. The Act created the E-rate program as part of the universal service fund to make advanced communications tools – namely the Internet – universally available in every school, classroom, and library in America. The E-Rate, not without its detractors, but championed by leaders like Chairman Markey, has been an enormous success in improving advanced access for libraries and schools.

As Congress puts universal service reform at the top of its telecom policy agenda, the Benton Foundation is supporting new research that advances a modern vision for Universal Service aimed at making broadband as universal as telephone service is today. **This effort will embrace the premise that Universal Broadband access is now as important to the advancement of the American ideal of equal opportunity in the 21st century as universal access to education and universal phone service was in the last.**

This principle is simple, powerful, and fundamentally important to our nation's future competitiveness and consumers' future opportunities. We must unleash the rivers of data and opportunity that broadband can enable, and extend the bounty from another turn in the river to a new generation of Americans.

Therefore, to restore the country's Internet competitiveness, we need:

- **Better data:** As management gurus always say, you can't accomplish something if you can't measure it – and the tools we are using today to measure our progress on broadband are about as sharp and refined as Fred Flinstone's hammer;
- **A strategy:** Despite President Bush's announcing the goal in 2004 of achieving Universal Affordable Broadband Access by 2007, we still have a long way to go in developing the plan, let alone implementing it. We are likely the only industrialized nation without a comprehensive and coordinated national broadband strategy;
- **To put the TOP program back on top:** For ten years, from 1994 to 2004, the Technology Opportunities Program – TOP – supported demonstrations of new telecommunications and information technologies to provide education, health care, or public information in the public and non-profit sectors. We once again need to be pushing the envelope for harnessing new technologies to advance critical public interest goals; and
- **Universal Service for the 21st Century:** As we celebrate the 10th anniversary of the E-rate later this month, we need to remember the critical role that the universal service program can play in advancing universal broadband – while also fostering competition, keeping rates affordable, and advancing speeds that enable digital voice, digital video and the vision Susan Hadden had where anyone can be a producer.

Congressman Markey and his colleagues have huge challenges on their plates. There are no easy solutions to the challenges of extending broadband's reach to every American. But these challenges must be addressed based on the same principles that have always guided progressive communications policy — a commitment to ubiquitous, affordable access to the most important technologies of the era.