

House of Commons Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology

Study: Broadband and Internet Access Across Canada

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Opening statement to the committee

Dr. Catherine Middleton (Professor, Ryerson University, As an Individual):

My name is Catherine Middleton. I'm an academic at the Ted Rogers School of Management in Toronto. I have focused on the development and use of broadband networks in Canada since the late 1990s. My focus is primarily residential and consumer use.

I want to make four points. I want to talk about the vision for broadband in Canada. I want to ask some questions about what kinds of networks we need to realize this vision, a question of supply. I have questions about how we ensure broad uptake of these networks to enable socio-economic benefit across society, and think about how we track our progress—that's a data question.

[1 – Vision] If we look at vision first, the question is, what do we want to be able to do with broadband connectivity? Other countries have articulated a set of objectives. They have national broadband plans; they have digital strategies. At present, Canada doesn't have either of these. The digital economy consultation paper done in 2010 notes that Canada needs a world-class digital infrastructure, but at the moment it's not clear exactly how Canada is going to develop that infrastructure without a clear vision to guide it.

[2 – Supply] Because we don't have vision, it's not entirely clear what kinds of networks we need, so I believe there needs to be a discussion about what we want broadband networks to be able to do. Once we understand that better, then we can understand the sorts of networks that should be available. The questions we need to consider are the sorts of speeds we need, and not just download speeds but upload speeds as well. What quality of networks do we need? We clearly need to have reliable quality networks. Do we need quality of service guarantees on these networks?

Do we need to have uniform networks? Is it important that Canadians across the country have access to similar networks so that we can roll out services across the country? Do we need ubiquitous connectivity? I'm thinking partially about mobile connectivity. While a lot of discussion about broadband is about fixed broadband, what sorts of plans should we have in place to consider mobile broadband connectivity? If we were to develop a target for broadband going beyond the CRTC's target of a five-megabit-per-second download and a one-megabit-per-second upload service available to all by 2015, should we be looking at a similar target for mobile broadband connectivity?

[3 – Demand] How do we encourage broad uptake of broadband networks so they enable socio-economic benefit across Canadian society? This is really a demand question. Unfortunately, we don't have a huge amount of recent data; 2010 is the latest publicly available Statistics Canada data. It suggests that 80% of Canadian households had Internet access. Almost all of that was broadband, but it was unevenly distributed. So 97% of the top-income quartile of Canadians had access, compared to 54% of the bottom quartile. We still have a digital divide, and this is a challenge we have to address.

In 2010 half the households that had no Internet access said they had no need for it. Is this a problem? Isn't this a problem? We need to better understand what is and isn't driving people to use broadband networks, and then if it's part of our national vision that everybody has access to broadband, we need to start thinking about how we can encourage more people to make use of these services and to obtain them in the first place.

One of the numbers provided by the CRTC in its communication monitoring report is that 75% of Canadian households had access to broadband services at download speeds of 50 megabits per second or higher—this is 2011 data—but at that time only 0.3% of households subscribed to these speeds. So there's clearly a gap between the supply of very high-speed broadband networks and actual demand for these networks, the uptake.

[4 – Data] Are Canadians making extensive use of these networks? We don't know, and that brings us to a question of data. How do we track our progress? We have some high-level metrics, we have some maps that provide an overview of basic coverage, but we don't really understand in great detail what people are doing online. We don't really understand their literacy levels. We don't fully understand the reasons that Canadians who are not currently online or are not regular users have chosen not to make use of these resources. While we have some information on availability, we need much more fine-grained data on upload and download speeds, on quality, on price, allowing us to think about affordability, the number of providers to look at, the choice that people have, and the uptake of various speeds.

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