

TACD

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Resolution on Open Broadband Networks

The evolution of the Internet from a narrowband service based primarily on telephone lines to a broadband service will usher in new options for serving our interests as consumers and citizens alike. The broadband digital media system will permit the transmission of new "converged" services, combining full-motion video and interactive data retrieval, for example. Users will be able to receive a greater diversity of news, information, and entertainment. Niche, special-interest content, particularly of a noncommercial or civic nature, should be more readily available. Producers of interactive content, including independent and public service programmers, should also have additional options to reach new audiences and markets.

However, the development of converged digital broadband platforms may not deliver on their potential to support democratic communications, let alone competitive commerce. Unlike the relative openness of today's Internet, broadband platforms are developing as closed, proprietary systems. Network operators will have the power to discriminate, denying access to or disfavoring content that it does not own or that it dislikes. For example, network operators (whether satellite, cable, wireless, or phone) could decide to slow such content while speeding up its own. Or they could charge prohibitive fees for such content, making it less affordable and thus less competitive. In addition, network operators could utilize their control over the "boot" screen, browser, directory, or electronic program guide (EPG), to also discriminate against non-affiliated or disfavored content.

It is essential that the broadband Internet reflect the qualities of diversity and democracy that has made the narrowband Internet such an important tool of communications.

Digital and interactive digital television (IDTV) is quickly becoming an important new medium that brings together the interactive qualities of the Internet and broadcasting. IDTV is likely to become a major source of interactive digital access for tens of millions, both in Europe and the U.S. It is essential that IDTV be governed by a similar open access policy, affording consumers reasonable access to all Web sites. IDTV must also ensure that all content providers for IDTV have similar reasonable access as well, including transmission and marketing functionalities.

Finally, broadband or IDTV services must foster the dissemination of civic and noncommercial services. Without policies to ensure the development of a digital commons to foster public service (including public affairs, educational, and cultural programming), it is likely that the broadband Internet will evolve further into a shopping mall that marginalizes the marketplace of ideas.

Therefore, TACD supports the following resolutions:

1. The US and EU member states should enact the appropriate policies to ensure open and non-discriminatory access for broadband Internet services on all major platforms. This includes access to EPGs and other functionalities necessary to ensure the widest access to websites and other Internet traffic.
2. Digital or interactive TV systems must also be required to operate in a similarly open and nondiscriminatory manner.
3. Policies must be enacted to ensure that noncommercial content providers receive favorable treatment on broadband platforms, including access to bandwidth, EPG's, and other essential delivery services.