

Large-scale free WiFi is still a dream worth pursuing

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Sometimes, it seems our nation no longer aspires to great things.

These days our astronauts hitch rides to the International Space Station on Soviet spacecraft, and just recently, the U.S. Postal Service — once the envy of the world — announced its intention to eliminate Saturday mail service. But for a few moments in early February, it looked like our nation was about to tackle a major new endeavor when The Washington Post ran a story about the Federal Communication Commission's (FCC) desire to create "super" WiFi networks across the United States ("[FCC super WiFi proposal prompts fierce lobbying from tech, telecom firms](#) [1]"). The article presented an imminent struggle between the telecoms and "tech giants" (like Google) over a seemingly new proposal by FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski.

The idea of allocating a portion of the broadcast spectrum for unlicensed uses has been around for years, but the article was riddled with dreamy allusions to "free access to the Web...available in just about every metropolitan area", "free-for-all WiFi service", and "free calls ... from mobile phones via the Internet." The notion of super WiFi networks, not to mention all the free stuff that would go with them, got the attention of mainstream media outlets. But like many things that are free, a super WiFi network coming to a metropolis (or hamlet) near you, turned out to be too good to be true (as many bloggers were quick to point out).

A quick scan of the FCC's recent press releases didn't yield anything new on the topic. Yes, the FCC would like to see some of the broadcast spectrum made available for unlicensed uses. But the ongoing debate (and it's been going on for a while) is over how much of that spectrum will ultimately be made available, if at all, let alone enough for some kind of super WiFi network. There would be a myriad of technical obstacles regarding spectrum allocation and interference, not to mention political roadblocks that would prevent such a proposal from getting off the ground

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any time soon. Only then can the government even think about actually providing internet service. The Washington Post's article did, however, present some newer arguments from the telecoms and "tech giants" in the debate over how much of the broadcast spectrum should become unlicensed bands.

Still, the article presented something to think about. Despite all the red flags that should have come to mind when reading it, there's one phrase that stayed with me: "The plan would be a global first." The author does provide some interesting possibilities in her story, such as driverless cars communicating with each other and healthcare devices wirelessly communicating to local hospitals, not to mention consumers' potential freedom from their internet bills. In the article, FCC chairman Julius Genachowski says, "Freeing up unlicensed spectrum is a vibrantly free-market approach that offers low barriers to entry to innovators developing the technologies of the future."

While it's easy to denounce any government endeavor, a modern infrastructure drives economic growth. A super WiFi system, if implemented properly, can ensure that those who can't afford internet access can have it, while also satisfying the longstanding goal of getting reliable internet services to some of the most rural areas of our nation. And, large-scale public WiFi networks would help bolster our leadership role in technology — the United States just fell to 10th place in the 2012 Global Innovation Index (www.globalinnovationindex.org). Returning to our Postal Service example, the agency faces extreme burdens of ensuring the free exchange of ideas and providing a service upon which many businesses rely. However, a robust super WiFi network could establish a new foundation to enable robust communications for consumers and businesses well into the future.

Could Super Wifi replace private telecom companies? Much of the rationale for their new "tiered" pricing for data plans stems from all the congestion they say is burdening their networks. Relieving traffic from the telcos should help them improve their service and help them establish better, more innovative services, worthy of being premium.

While creating large, free WiFi would be a monumental undertaking fraught with private sector and political resistance, it is still a dream we should not let out of our sight.

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