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## **The Broadband Task Force Report votes for the Internet**

By Timothy Denton and François Ménard

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of January 1991, Tim Berners-Lee made the World Wide Web program free for anyone to pick up, and thus began the revolution that made the Internet a household world. He did not need the permission of the owners of the Internet to make it available for free to everyone. There are no owners of the Internet. Just like the English language, it is available to all who wish to use it. At its core, the Internet is an Esperanto for computers.

The most important fact about the Internet is that no one can tell you in advance what you can put onto it, just as no one censors novels before they are written. The creators of e-mail and web browsers, together with the web itself, did not need to ask anyone's permission. New music sharing formats (Napster and Gnutella) are out before the copyright interests can stop them. Being an open standard, a common language, the net allows new services because no one has to seek the permission of anyone to innovate.

This openness presents a fundamental challenge to the legacy systems of telephones and cable television. They run on the principle that the owners of the networks define what services are. They are highly specialized for a very few purposes, whereas the Internet is a general language enabling computers to communicate packets, without specifying what they are to be used for. No one owns that language; it is shareware.

The best analogy of the Internet to the telephone or cable systems is the contrast between highways and railways. The owner of the highway does not determine, beyond very broad limits of weight and size, what shall travel on the highway. No one files a flight plan; you get on and off as you choose. No one exercises central control over traffic, with the result that there are crashes and traffic jams. Drivers coming on traffic jams re-route themselves. The same applies packets on the Internet.

Railways require central control. The path and movement of trains are centrally managed. The owner of the railbed owns the cars that travel on it, or has strict rules of interconnection with other railways to pass traffic. You cannot put rail wheels on your car and get on the track. The ideal of the railway, as with the phone system, is a completely specified result: telephone calls go through. It is highly conservative to change because the whole is engineered for a narrow set of purposes. Not so with the Net.

The chief fact enabling innovation on the Internet is that the owner of the transmission path does not own or control the vehicle (application) that uses it. This has allowed creators to innovate and people to select what will succeed or fail.

The National Broadband Task Force, which published its report a few days ago, had a choice before it: whether to extend the old model, or opt for the new, where the users of the network rather than the owners define what services will be. To their great credit, they have opened the door to the new model.

At the back of the report (<http://broadband.gc.ca/english/index.html>) is the key recommendation. It says that, for any build-out of a network employing government funds, there must be what is called “open third-party access”, and more important, it specifies what is meant by that term. A third party is you or me, and by defining the terms on which people can get onto the network, they are establishing the bill of rights for people to use the networks of the future.

Among those rights were:

- The owner of the network cannot knowingly plan for a limitation in the types of services which could be offered to other service providers or end users;
- End users could freely choose among different service providers;
- Neutral meeting points have to be provided. ([http://broadband.gc.ca/Broadband-document/english/appendix\\_g.htm](http://broadband.gc.ca/Broadband-document/english/appendix_g.htm))

This is the adoption of the Internet model. Open access permits innovation without permission. It stands as a remarkable advance in government policy. It puts Canada well ahead of the United States, where federal lawmakers are proposing to entrench the old model in a new telecommunications bill, at the request of the telephone companies.

There are reasons to think this Internet-friendly model could be thwarted. Canada has adopted open-access policy before, in the case of cable television, and four years later we have still made no real progress in defining what it could mean. In this case, however, there is reason for hope: with the right conditions set down from the beginning, new

networks can be built on new principles, and avoid the constrictions of the legacy networks.

Anyone who appreciates what a difference the Internet has made in their lives should encourage the government to implement this part of the report. The Task Force has voted for the future. Let the government know that the Task Force recommendations on open access have the support of people who use the Internet.

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