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Life, Liberty And Broadband

By Marc Spiegler

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High-speed Net access is a luxury in most places. Sweden is making it a right.

Sweden's cities already boast some of the world's most extensive broadband networks, and a new bill before parliament would extend those fat pipes to the country's deepest hinterlands.

Renowned early adopters of new technologies, the Swedes increasingly see broadband access as a fundamental utility, like water and electricity, to which every citizen is entitled. "Things available in Stockholm should also be available in the farthest mountains," says Arne Granholm, a high-tech adviser in Sweden's industry ministry, which put forward the broadband proposal. Sweden's parliament will vote on the legislation this month, and it is expected to pass with little opposition.

While broadband is still a luxury for a few urban residents in even the most technologically advanced countries, Sweden is joining Singapore as one of the few places to treat broadband access as a quasi-civil right. Singapore is working to make high-speed Internet access available to all homes and offices, although the concentration of its 3.5 million people on one small island makes that a relatively easy goal. By comparison, Sweden's roughly 9 million people live in a geographic pattern similar to Canada's: A few teeming cities are situated along the southern coast, but expanses of nearly desolate mountain and tundra lie inland and to the north.

The ambition of providing broadband access to people in such remote locations makes Sweden's plan remarkable. It is not surprising, though, as Sweden is experiencing an economic surge powered in part by heavy use of wireless technology. And its population has one of the highest rates of Internet use: 58 percent, according to International Data Corp.

Industry estimates of broadband penetration in Swedish homes have reached as high as 12 percent. Even if that number is inflated by companies with a stake in promoting broadband, it's still among the highest in the world.

Naturally, Sweden's big broadband companies have jostled mightily to wire urban areas such as Stockholm, Uppsala and Gothenburg, where 70 percent of the population resides. The major competitors in this race include Telia, the former state-run telephone monopoly; Utfors, a Swedish ISP and telephone company; and Bredbandsbolaget, whose founder, Jonas Birgersson, earned the nickname Broadband Jesus for his

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fervent promotion of the medium.

Yet even those in the telecom industry realize that a market-only solution would not work for Sweden's more remote sectors. As a result, the private companies are upgrading the telephone lines and TV cables for high-speed Internet access, and the public and private sectors are sharing the \$2.2 billion total cost. "We have these vast areas where the market forces would not have been enough to bring in broadband," says Ann-Marie Nilsson, general manager of the Swedish IT and telecom industry association. "Ten percent of the country would never have gotten access, and, in the short term, 30 percent would not have been covered."

Pragmatists point out that there's more than Sweden's deeply held egalitarianism driving its broadband initiative. Swedish cities' vibrant new economy has only exacerbated the historic exodus of young people from the countryside to urban areas, which has unnerved politicians who fear overcrowded metropolitan areas and the loss of pastoral culture. Taking broadband to rural areas will not preserve an agrarian way of life, but Sweden's leaders hope it will keep some people in small towns without leaving them out of what Swedish officials call "the information society."

But merely spreading broadband to towns and villages might not be enough, says Stefan Hallgren, COO of Globalminds.com, a Web development company. Seeking a calmer environment and a lower overhead, Hallgren last year left Stockholm to set up Globalminds in his native town, Osterseund, which already has fast Internet access. But 90 percent of new-economy deals are still getting cut in the cities, and it is likely to stay that way for a while. Says Hallgren, "It takes more than broadband to create hot spots."

[Marc Spiegler](#) writes from Zurich about the new economy in Europe.