Many Americans Do Not Have Broadband Internet Access

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While countries such as South Korea and Japan reap the economic and technological benefits of inexpensive broadband access at the highest speeds, the United States is falling behind. It is home to the most costly, slow, and unreliable high-speed Internet access in the developed world. Former President George W. Bush and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) have stated that broadband deployment is their “highest priority.” Yet their policies have stifled competition and deterred localities from establishing their own networks. In fact, major telecommunications companies, high-paid lobbyists, and their political cronies have launched a deceptive and contradictory campaign against municipal broadband, hindering the nation’s economy.

Two decades ago, the chattering classes fretted about economic upheaval rising from Japan and the Asian Tigers. They feared an invasion of cars, microchips, and Karaoke that would take away American jobs, take over U.S.-dominated in-
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dustries, and shift cultural norms. In the 1990s, America responded with a boom in high technology and Hollywood exports. But a revolution is again brewing in places like Japan and South Korea. This time it’s about “broadband”—a technology that, in terms of powering economies, could be the 21st century equivalent of electricity. But rather than relive the jingoism [excessive patriotism] of the 1980s, American policy makers would be wise to take a cue from the Asian innovators and implement new policies to close the digital divide at home and with the rest of the world.

Most people know broadband as an alternative to their old, slow dial-up Internet connection. These high-capacity data networks made of fiber-optic cables provide a constant, unbroken connection to the Internet. But broadband is about much more than checking your e-mail or browsing on EBay. In the near future, telephone, television, radio and the Web all will be delivered to your home via a single broadband connection. In the not-so-distant-future, broadband will be an indispensable part of economic, personal, and public life. Those countries that achieve universal broadband are going to hold significant advantages over those who don’t. And so far, the United States is poised to be a follower—not a leader—in the broadband economy.

American residents and businesses now pay two to three times as much for slower and poorer quality service than countries like South Korea or Japan. Since 2001, according to the International Telecommunications Union [the United Nations agency for information and communication technology issues], the United States has fallen from fourth to 16th in the world in broadband penetration. Thomas Bleha [a journalist and former Foreign Service officer in Japan] recently argued in *Foreign Affairs* that what passes for broadband in the United States is “the slowest, most expensive and least reliable in the developed world.” While about 60 percent of U.S. households do not subscribe to broadband because it is either unavailable