

Comments on the Issues for Consultation

Q1. Are there any regulatory issues, licensing restrictions or other factors that are hampering the growth of public Wi-Fi services in the country?

Ans. If we see public Wi-Fi in India, it is basically taking place in urban India that too in Schools, Colleges, Hotels, Universities, or company campuses etc. which is not really public Wi-Fi. Though recently some municipalities like in Delhi has also started thinking of providing the Wi-Fi services to their citizens. The main reason of non-proliferation of Wi-Fi networks in urban India is that all major TSPs has invested hugely in their mobile networks for 3G/4G and they have built a good coverage area offering reasonably high speed to the customers so as to run their smartphones. There are some operators like BSNL who is not installing 4G network rather is installing Wi-Fi Hotspots at select locations of select cities. Neither the operators are in any hurry to invest on another city wide network (i.e. Wi-Fi) without realising the gains on the capital invested (in terms of equipment and spectrum charges) on the 3G and 4G networks nor the customers feel the immediate need. In urban area roughly 30% population is living rest 70% is living in the rural. For the urban population we are ready to give all sort of facilities 3G/4G and Wi-Fi but what about rural? Even the current TSPs are not even thinking to provide 4G in rural areas rather there are many areas where still 3G has not reached. Though in many areas 2G has reached but is 2G of any use for smartphones in rural it is as good as no internet connectivity. In rural India seeing the fate of hotspot pilots installed in selected urban locations nobody is willing to provide public Wi-Fi services in rural because of simply no return on investments.

Q2. What regulatory/licensing or policy measures are required to encourage the deployment of commercial models for ubiquitous city-wide Wi-Fi networks as well as expansion of Wi-Fi networks in remote or rural areas?

Ans. We should break this problem in two separate problems – Wi-Fi in Urban and Wi-Fi in Rural. Because urban strategy shall not work in rural and vice versa.

The main objective of any regulatory/licensing or policy measures should be equal distribution of services throughout country be it rural or urban so that every citizen gets benefitted. Though it has happened in Voice segment over mobile, it has not happened in internet/broadband or mobile internet segment. We are enjoying 4G in cities though in select areas, villages are still grappling with 2G only. And to fill this gap we should think of community Wi-Fi networks in rural on priority.

In any area be it rural or urban, we cannot have multiple Wi-Fi networks like- Wi-Fi of Airtel, Wi-Fi of Vodafone, Wi-Fi of Idea or Wi-Fi of BSNL as it will be sheer wastage of national resources. What we need to have is a truly 'Public Wi-Fi Network' which may be owned by the municipalities in urban. In order to have proper supervision and monitoring if the networks, municipalities may be permitted to provide internet services over Wi-Fi networks after having a license from the Department of Telecom (DoT). As it will be equally accessible to all the subscribers of all TSPs or non-subscribers also on non-discriminatory basis. As per the current technology present in the smartphones, customers shall be automatically

latched on this Wi-Fi networks and there will be no issues of interpretability. As the TSPs in urban are already having a good coverage of 3G and 4G in select areas, municipalities need not to install their networks in every nook and corner of the city/town rather important pockets may be covered to complement the TSPs mobile networks. Technical support for installation, integration, inspection and monitoring of these public Wi-Fi networks may be done through the field units of the DoT i.e. TERM Cells. No financial support to be given to these municipalities for installation of these networks as they have sufficient resources. Municipalities may be allowed to provide the Wi-Fi services on PPP mode. Provision of the Wi-Fi services through municipalities is already happening in many states of USA. Though there will be some opposition from the existing ISPs/TSPs but it need to be handled in wider national interest. They may be convinced that the backend bandwidth anyway shall be purchased by the municipalities from them only.

Government needs to play a bigger role in expansion of community Wi-Fi networks in villages to bridge the digital divide. And for building community Wi-Fi networks in all villages, no NGO, no private operators will come forward at the scale required, it is only the government machinery which need to be involved i.e. involvement of central government, state government, district administration and Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). And now the ecosystem has already taken shape in form of NOFN/Bharatnet. We need to use the concept of 'co-creation of public services' by involving the panchayats. We have to involve panchayats in installing the community Wi-Fi networks in villages because internet is also a basic need now-a-days and panchayats are nothing but legalised NGOs mandated by the constitution to provide the public services to the villagers. As the communication is a central subject as per the constitution of India, we may authorise the Panchayats by issuing them an ISP license by having a new category say as Type-D. Backend connectivity for these community Wi-Fi networks may be ensured through the BSNL/BBNL. Initial funds may be provided to the panchayats by centre and states jointly to install the infrastructure as the panchayats in villages are not as cash/resources rich as municipalities in urban. And to maintain the Wi-Fi network through the private players we may permit the panchayats to collect a nominal fee in lieu of the unlimited internet to the villagers on non-discriminatory bases. These community Wi-Fi networks will be just the big replicas of what are there in University/Colleges/companies/Hotels etc. in cities but supported by a policy framework. In rural also like urban areas, technical support for installation, integration, inspection and monitoring of these public Wi-Fi networks may be done through the field units of the DoT i.e. TERM Cells.

The creation of the Public Wi-Fi Networks parallel to the private mobile networks shall give them the enough competition to set the tariff of internet services.

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