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A Bronx Tale: The Amazing, Unknown Free Wireless

Sunday, 24 January 2010 16:43



Solar AP

One million New Yorkers can get free wifi through 187 access points across Harlem, the South Bronx, and Brooklyn in the neighborhoods that need it most. If your WiFi can see smartnetnyc, urbanwifitv or smartnetnych, you should be able to register on the splash page that comes up. When I visited them Saturday, 392 users had logged in by 1:30, although until now they have had zero publicity. On the left is a solar powered access point on top of a Harlem college building and on the right an access point map across Harlem and the Bronx. Traffic has recently gone from 30 gigabytes a week to 30 gig a day, a terabyte/month.

Meraki mesh networks like this have proven extraordinarily effective wiring communities. John Bicket and Sanjit Biswas created the company out of the work they did at MIT on Project Rooftop, connecting much of Cambridge. After initial excitement about mesh, many results were disappointing but Meraki is now being praised by users and the technology is deployed in 143 countries. Cisco has also provided important gear and support.

Nearly all the outreach has been via twitter, http://twitter.com/smartnetnyc . The style is informal; a node went down in a snowstorm and the announcement was "we'll fix it after it stops snowing."

It's all coordinated from an equipment filled small office in the South Bronx by Doug Frazier and Stu Reid, who have been bringing cable TV and the Internet to the South Bronx since 1986.

http://spectrum.ieee.org/computing/networks/a-bronx-tale. Five years ago, I visited them in Mott Haven where they were delivering IPTV to housing projects. They ran their own fiber from building to building. They used Next Level VDSL gear to get from the basement to each apartment.

One Economy, the NYC Housing Department, local schools, churches and a local radio station have provided support. Much of their work is done by community trainees from Per Scholas and SOBRO. Doug tells me the kids installing gear have played an important role in training. "Older folks often think technology is a young people thing. When the kids are in the buildings putting in the radios, people ask for help. It's not a formal program, but it works."



Harlem-Bronx Access

Nearly all the projects for "sustainable broadband development" that are based on education/information have had dismal results. In particular, the Connect Kentucky program when you examine the data has been worse than useless by their criteria. Nearly none of the other programs have incorporated a serious look at the results - and most had almost none. Initially, the stimulus was ready to spend \$750M on similar programs, but by late fall I heard they were instead targeting "as little as the statue requires" \$250M. In March at the Columbia-Georgetown event, academics and others cast serious doubt of most claims of "demand stimulus." By December, the most respected D.C. expert on the subject told me privately he had seen no evidence any of the programs really worked.

I've been extremely skeptical about the "demand stimulus" programs, especially when I examined the Connect Kentucky data so often cited and discovered they actually had negative results. Availability in Kentucky went from 60% to 95% in the years studied, which more than explains all the growth CK claimed was due to demand stimulus. I reviewed the data with them at the time, and pointed to ways to re-examine the data they had that might provide meaningful results. They never did that nor provided any meaningful follow-up data. CK is attacked by many because of their close ties to the carriers and they essentially been derided as stooges for the Bells. I take a different point of view about them, preferring to think of them as well-meaning people who want to bring computers to poor kids but are fooling themselves about what works.

The early results I'm seeing here are exciting, but it's far too early to say these methods can be replicated elsewhere. This is a team with 20 years bringing connections to the neighborhood, willing to go out in the snow or to unspool their own fiber. Doug answers the tech support calls on Sunday. They do all their own system design without the expensive consultants coming in, refurbish old gear they get from donations, and haven't spent any money on pr, marketing, or fancy lawyers. I suspect it's often been hard to keep things going. Much of the success is because of this experience and their grassroots backing. Nearly none of those looking for federal money for similar work have those skills and track record.

Next time you're in Harlem, Brownsville, or the South Bronx, please log on and let me know how it's going. db

