INFORMATION DISCLOSURE FOR BROADBAND SERVICES

Empowering Informed Choices in The 4G Era

Seminar Report

#BroadbandLabels

Introduction

CUTS International, in association with The Bengal Chamber of Commerce & Industries (BCC&I)[1] and Deepalaya[2] organised a seminar on '**Information Disclosure for Broadband Services Empowering Informed Choices in the 4G Era' at Kolkata** on May 16, 2018. The seminar was a part of the '*Consumer Broadband Labels*'[3] initiative, which focusses on designing a standard information disclosure mechanism, in form of a Broadband Label. The objective was to highlight the need for Information Disclosure mechanisms, and discuss different perspectives on Quality of Service (QoS) for broadband services in India.

Opening Session

Bratindra Bhattacharya, Director, CUTS International acknowledged the importance of mobile broadband in our daily lives, and mentioned that most mobile broadband users are unaware of whether the services promised to them are actually being delivered or not. For instance, 4G subscribers are mostly unaware of the maximum and minimum upload/download speed they are entitled to receive. Highlighting the need for infrastructure development in

providing better QoS for wireless broadband, he pointed out that India has the lowest peak speeds in the Asia-Pacific region and infrastructure growth in this particular sector has been as low as 1.5 percent.

While speaking on the need for introducing labels for broadband services, he mentioned that labelling broadband services is of paramount importance as labels are important in bridging the information gap between consumers and Telecom Service Providers/Internet Service Providers (TSPs/ISPs). Further, labels are crucial in bringing about transparency and promoting informed decision making by consumers.

Angana Guha Roy Chowdhury, Deputy Director, BCC&I pointed out that broadband subscriber base in India is growing significantly since the last couple of decades and the Indian telecom sector stands to be 2nd largest globally, with an estimated telephone and internet subscriber base of 500 million in 2018. She further added that with the growing dependence of economic activities on Information and Communication Technology (ICT), the telecommunication sector can play a pivotal role in positioning India as a digitally empowered society. In this context, she stressed upon the need for an improved and enhanced quality of internet and broadband services. She mentioned that in India, until recently, QoS has suffered owing to tariff-related issues, concerns regarding setting up of towers, device-compatibility across geographical boundaries etc., resulting in the lowest internet speed, across the Asia Pacific region.

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[1] http://snip.ly/qo2sf
[2] http://snip.ly/46n2x
[3] Project Website: http://snip.ly/oh766

While on one hand, she emphasised on the need for improving the mobile broadband QoS, while on the other hand, sheunderlined the need for taking into account the Quality of Experience (QoE) of mobile broadband users. In her concluding remarks, she laid stress on the need for labelling broadband services with regards to consumers' empowerment, which, in turn, would help promoting competition among the TSPs/ISPs and bring about transparency in services.

Pranab Kumar Ghosh, Secretary, Deepalaya acknowledged the fact that mobile broadband has become an indispensable part of consumers' lives. As the spectrum of broadband application has increased, issues attached to the service has become more complicated. The shift from the era of Kilobyte per seconds (Kbps) to Megabyte per second (Mbps) has underlined the need for better quality of internet services. He opined that it is necessary for consumers to understand and realise challenges and benefits associated with the quality of broadband services.

Rahul Singh, Policy Analyst, CUTS International mentioned that around 95 percent of the Indian telecom subscribers use wireless mode of operations and the emergence of such a large subscriber base, coupled with the government's 'Digital India' initiative has garnered a number of opportunities in the telecommunications sector. He stated that CUTS' initiative on broadband labelling has tried to bring together all relevant stakeholders and discuss the procedure and challenges of improving QoS and QoE of broadband services. He further added that through this initiative, CUTS has also been able to create a network of relevant stakeholders (government, regulator, industry, consumers, students, academia, consumer groups, individuals), who are ready to work as a cohesive group to ensure improvements in the quality of internet services. He mentioned that the initiative has a three-point objective:

- Change in attitude of consumers, as most of them identify 'internet speed' as the most important component, while considering internet and broadband services. However, it is necessary to generate awareness on other constituents of broadband services, such as latency, experience, etc.
- Ensure that relevant ICT stakeholders are well-informed, well-educated and take responsibility in providing better quality of broadband services
- Inculcate adequate information about rights and obligations of broadband services in the partner network

Sadhan Pande, Hon'ble Minister-in-Charge, Department of Consumer Affairs, Government of West Bengal recognised the importance of broadband and internet services. He said that the State Government has initiated many critical e-governance services for its citizens, which would be impactful if the quality of broadband internet is enhanced and more consistent. In order to take this discussion forward, he announced that a stakeholders' consultation meeting will be organised soon, wherein the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), TSPs/ISPs in West Bengal and civil society organisations, such as CUTS would be invited to deliberate on how to improve the broadband services in West Bengal.

Panel Discussion: Broadband ─ Quality of Service, Regulations & Relevance of Information Disclosure

Presentations
- Kallol Kumar Paul, Scientist – F, Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS), Kolkata

Panellists
- Pranab Kumar Ghosh, Secretary, Deepalaya
- Syed Kazi, President, North East ICT Association of India
- Aloke Mookherjea, Chairman, Howden Solyvent (India) Private Limited
- Amrit Lal Saha, President and Director, Consumer Protection Association, Agartala, Tripura

The session commenced with a presentation by **Kallol Kumar Paul** which mentioned the purpose of National Standards and advantages of standardisation. He opined that BIS has developed a service rule '15700'[4] for service sector operators, which if mandated by the Government of India, would bring telecom services under the purview of this rule, whereby consumers may access the inbuilt complaint redressal mechanism.

Following the presentation, the panel broadly discussed basic concepts of broadband labelling, coupled with its multi-fold benefits that may accrue for consumers, subject to a greater improvement in QoS. On similar grounds, TRAI has already launched an application named 'MySpeed', which aims at measuring data speeds and experience (star ratings). Along with this app, TRAI has also issued various regulations on QoS to standardise the country's broadband services.

Certain observations were highlighted in the course of the discussion: *'technical literacy'* in the rural, semi-urban and peri-urban regions being a prominent one. As the penetration of internet services in urban and rural areas differs to a great extent, India is heading towards a 'digital divide'. In rural India, consumers face patchy network with an average internet speed of below 500 kbps with intermittent Wi-Fi connectivity. Google is presently working with the Government of India in providing internet connectivity in rural areas under the 'Project Loon'[5] initiative to strengthen ICT infrastructure.

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[4] http://snip.ly/7mptq
[5] http://snip.ly/n2cys

The following suggestions came out of the panel discussion:

- It is imperative that service-related disclosures should be made in local vernacular languages.
- Service providers should voluntarily disclose the components of QoS at the public domain to make the system more transparent and promote informed decision making ultimately leading to creation of fair competition among the TSPs/ISPs.
- There is a need for setting an independent Consumer Advisory Group (CAG) for broadband services, wherein relevant stakeholders could discuss future prospects, challenges and its required solutions.
- TSPs/ISPs should focus more on improving QoS for rural consumers.
- The service contracts between the user and the ISP should be comprehensive but written in simple language.

Interactive Session with the Participants
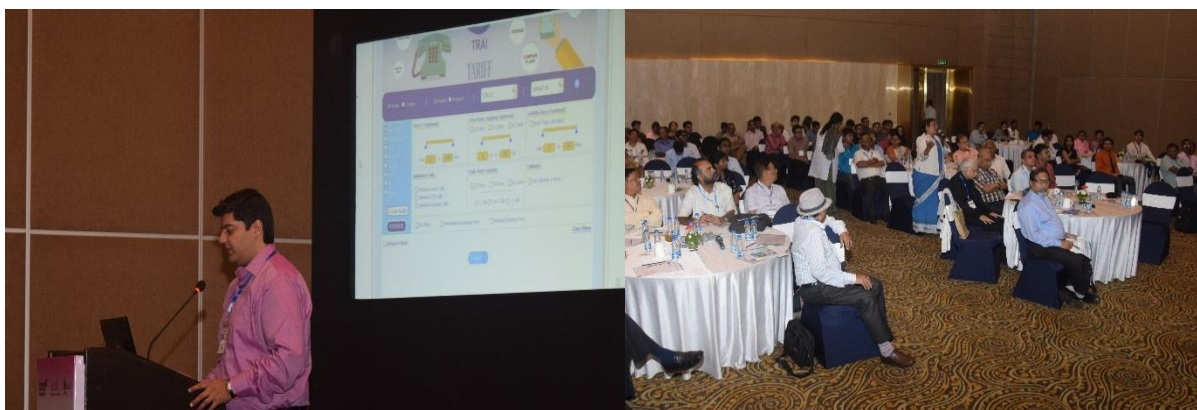
- **Rahul Singh** conducted an interactive session on 'Components of the Proposed Broadband Labels'. He mentioned the fact that TRAI has launched a *beta version* of its tariff portal[6] in order to assist consumers in understanding the available tariff plans offered by for telecom providers in a particular service area.

- He showcased the standard labelling format developed by CUTS and IIT, Delhi, which has two distinct categories: qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative labelling represents QoS in star format whereas Quantitative labelling represents QoE in a numeric format. He explained the features of qualitative and quantitative labels and also laid down their benefits, challenges and effectiveness.

- Further the group discussed various factors important to make purchase decision for broadband services, implementation of labels, steps necessary to make labels a robust tool. The participants emphasised that a proposed labelling needs proper verification by independent third parties; else consumers with limited technical knowledge would not be able to comprehend the QoS they are supposed to receive.

- The participants also underlined the need for customising labels based on geographical differences. It was pointed out that labels should be made as simple as possible for consumers to comprehend. In addition, the need to make them available in local languages was also underlined.

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[6] http://snip.ly/ugsj8