

It's hard to be neutral in debate over 'net neutrality'

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By David Kolata

You can tell a lot about an issue by looking at who's on each side, and the ongoing debate over "net neutrality" is a perfect example of this. On one side, you have a broad-based coalition of more than 700 groups, joined by Google, Yahoo, Amazon, eBay, Netflix and all the other companies that have made the Internet the indispensable tool it is today.

You also have the guy who actually invented the World Wide Web — better known as Tim Berners-Lee.

On the other side, you have the big telecommunications and cable companies.

Leave it to the AT&Ts, Comcasts and Verizons of the world to galvanize a grassroots movement that includes all sides of the political spectrum, from the ACLU to the Christian Coalition.

So, what is the debate over net neutrality really about?

Like many debates in our country today, it's about power and money. Who should have the power to control what flows over the Internet's superhighway and who will make the most money off it.

Since its creation, net neutrality has been the guiding principal of the Internet and it largely has been responsible for the explosive growth and innovation we've seen on the web. By guaranteeing that Internet access providers must treat all network traffic the same, it ensures that you can view a small Web site run off of someone's home computer as easily as you can a large corporate site.

Net neutrality also prevents large Internet access providers from blocking or impeding access to the web-based services of their competitors.

In other words, you, the consumer, has the power to determine what you see, read or purchase over the Internet and the best ideas rise as a result of user choice.

Now, however, the big telecommunications and cable giants are spending millions of dollars trying to overturn this guiding principal. They want the ability to herd people to the Web sites that pay them the most, turning the Internet into the functional equivalent of a tollway, with Internet access providers like AT&T and Comcast serving as toll collector.

How does this affect consumers in their homes or businesses?

Imagine you're sitting at home trying to check your bank balance on line, but the page won't load. The problem? Your Internet provider has an exclusive deal with Chase and your local bank takes a back seat when it comes to connection speed and other functions needed to make its Web site work effectively.

Or, perhaps you decide to join the growing number of consumers who are dropping traditional phone service in favor of the new Internet companies such as Vonage or Skype. Without net neutrality to protect your choice, AT&T or Comcast could block you from using those services or degrade them so much that they don't work properly. If this sounds far-fetched, think again:

In 2004, a North Carolina Internet service provider, Madison River, blocked its customers from using any rival web-based phone service. In 2005, during a strike, Canadian telephone giant Telus blocked customers from visiting a Web site that was sympathetic to the company's union.

In April, AOL, owned by Time Warner, blocked all e-mails that mentioned an advocacy campaign opposed to the company's pay-to-send email plan.

We've all come to take fast and free access to online information for granted. It's hard to imagine a world in which the information we need is not at our fingertips.

But it's a very real threat. Congress is in the midst of overhauling the 1996 Telecommunications Act and, with billions of dollars in potential revenue at stake, the telecom and cable industries will spare no expense in their campaign to radically alter the Internet.

The industry won the first volley earlier this month, when the U. S. House voted against protecting net neutrality. It now falls on the U.S.

Senate to preserve the Internet as we know it. A bill is being heard in committee this week.

If the thought of giant industries controlling what you can access on the web scares you, you're not alone. What else but naked fear could make bedfellows of the Gun Owners of America and Moveon.org?

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