

# Globe Talk: The not-so-neutral Internet

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Pornography and gambling may be flourishing online, but despite making it easier for such evils to rake in big bucks, few would argue that the Internet is a great tool. In fact, it may be difficult to find someone who has gone online and experienced the convenience and utility of cyberspace firsthand to state that they would rather go without it.

What's more, even the most seasoned civil servant would argue that had it not been left completely up to individual entrepreneurs and computer programmers, the Internet would have never taken off the way it has in such a short space of time.

"I've got to admit, if the (United Nations) were involved ... or some government ... the Internet would still be in its infancy and still in its nappies," one senior British telecommunications official told United Press International.

So it seems hardly surprising that some are vehemently against any effort by policymakers to intervene in the market that might jeopardize the Internet's freedoms, and indeed efforts to do so were rejected by the U.S. House Energy and Commerce Committee earlier this month. But what proponents of the so-called Net-neutrality bill are calling for is to stop what they fear will lead to higher connection costs and less freedom in accessing online material.

Indeed, some of the biggest opponents of the bill are also the biggest U.S. providers of Internet service in the United States, who argue that entrepreneurship and innovation in cyberspace will be curtailed if they

are not allowed to price access according to what they argue are based on market economics.

Specifically, they are calling for the right to charge content providers such as Google and Yahoo! as well as other smaller companies for using their services. Currently, providers only make money off those who are subscribers for their service, while content providers are able to post online free of charge. In short, provider companies such as Verizon and AT&T are calling for the freedom to create a two-tiered system in cyberspace, whereby those Web sites that pay a higher connection fee would get priority over others.

Another proposal is for subscribers to Internet connection fees to pay per connection, or according to which premium sites they link up to, unlike the current system where a flat monthly fee ensures unlimited access to cyberspace.

In short, what the cable and telecommunications companies are calling for is the freedom to be able to price service fees as they see fit, which would be inhibited by the Net-neutrality act should it be adopted. Proponents of the legislation, meanwhile, argue that the success of the Internet has been because it has ensured that all Web sites are treated equally, with no one site getting preferential treatment in connectivity or distribution.

Some argue, however, that having a fast, premium lane for certain sites and not for others, or having a system whereby Internet users can choose what their priorities are, would be in the best interest of all involved.

"If a doctor were doing 3-D surgery halfway around the world, relying on the Internet connection ... you don't want it to get shaky," said Lawrence Lessig, a law professor at Stanford University who was one of the panelists on a forum on Net neutrality hosted by the American

Enterprise Institute and the Brookings Institution's Joint Center for Regulatory Studies earlier this week.

Lessig argued that in such cases, it would make sense for both users and Web site providers to offer a premium site whereby the higher connection fees from both sides would ensure effective connectivity. But were the Net-neutrality bill to become law, such offerings would become illegal.

Still, for others, the Internet is still too much a work in progress for legislators to make a commitment one way or another, and their advice is for the existing system, namely that of laissez-faire, to prevail.

"Before there's any regulation in place, we need to understand its impact on the present and the future ... and we need to understand both the technology and the law" behind what has made the Internet so successful until now, said David Farber, a computer science professor at Carnegie Mellon University.

The problem, however, is unless legislators take action, the let's-just-see-what-happens attitude of the Internet system might be at the mercy of those who currently have the upper hand in providing people access to the World Wide Web in the first place.

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