

Net-neutrality debate reaching tempest

June 15 2006

Internet users could soon feel the aftershock of a decision the Federal Communications Commission made last August. The FCC placed phone companies in a class with cable services, freeing them from decades-old nondiscrimination provisions, effective in one year.

As those 12 months come to an end, the debate over Internet regulation is rising to a tempest. Net neutrality, which has been an issue for months, is finally creeping into the public's vocabulary.

The idea behind Net neutrality is basically that all Internet content must be treated equally by network operators and travel at the same speed over the Internet. The issue can be boiled down to these questions: Should high-speed Internet providers be able to create a two-tiered system, with a fast lane and a slow lane of Internet access? And should network providers be prevented from charging Web site operators more money for their content to flow over the faster connection?

"The Internet becomes like a cable system where the network pipe owner gets to control who gets on the system and at what quality," Gigi Sohn, president of the advocacy organization Public Knowledge, told United Press International. "In today's Internet, consumers have control. In an Internet without net neutrality the telephone company or cable operator in 98 percent of the cases has control."

The policy debate has made strange bedfellows of proponents of left and right-wing politics, public and private arenas, and commercial and non-commercial interests. The SavetheInternet.com Coalition has attracted

over 800,000 petition signers, more than 6,100 bloggers, and 761 groups as diverse as Gun Owners of America, MoveOn.org Civic Action, the Christian Coalition of America, the American Library Association and Music for America.

Internet content and application providers, such as Google, eBay, Amazon, Vonage and Microsoft, support regulation. They argue that leaving the Internet unregulated will create a system that levies substantial fees on Web site operators for high-quality delivery of their services and allows Web site blocking.

One oft-cited case involves the telecommunications company Madison River, which blocked competitor Vonage's site on its network until the FCC stepped in last year. However, epidemic problems are hypothetical at this point.

"By any measure the market forces have worked," Thomas J. Tauke, Verizon executive vice president for public affairs, policy and communications, said at a broadband policy summit last month.

"Consumers have full access to the Internet. Companies are making massive new investment ... This is creating a very competitive marketplace and an exciting array of new services. All of this, most importantly, is bringing great benefits to consumers."

Cable and phone companies like Verizon and BellSouth argue that they need a way to recoup their losses after investments in new technology and expansion and insist that they would not meddle in customers' Web service, which would only hurt their companies anyway by alienating users.

Tauke said that Net neutrality would "severely hamper the development of improved Internet access and seriously delay the development of new services."

However, Sohn said that phone and cable companies have been investing and will continue to invest because that's what they need to do to compete.

"We're not saying you can't do things with a network that will make you money. There's a whole raft of services that they can provide," Sohn said. "There is one business model they can't engage in, that's one that discriminates in favor of the content and applications in which they have a financial interest."

Internet service is run by a duopoly of cable and phone companies, Craig Aaron, communications director for the media reform organization Free Press, explained.

"The companies are vastly profitable already," Aaron told UPI. First-quarter earnings for 2006 were up from the same period last year for AT&T, Verizon and BellSouth. Service providers charge consumers and site operators for access to the Internet, and Net neutrality does not aim at preventing this. What net neutrality would do is keep companies from reserving the fast lane for their services and corporate partners, Aaron said, and from selecting what content is worth being spread.

"Net Neutrality is as basic to the function of the Internet as non-discrimination is to the U.S. Constitution," Rep. Markey, D-Mass., said after the June 8 defeat of the "Net Neutrality Amendment," which he co-sponsored.

The telephone and cable companies are using their clout to transform the Internet from "a democratic Field of Dreams to an exclusive set of Gated Communities," Markey said. Charging for a faster connection, he argued, would stymie the innovation and freedom of individuals and small groups that contributed to the structure and strength of today's Internet.

The debate continues in Congress, with multiple bills circulating that address this policy question.

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