Internet businesses promote Net neutrality

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Internet businesses are expressing concern over the government's lack of interest in Net neutrality. With the Telecommunications Act under way, these businesses and the public in general are fearful of the absence of Net neutrality in the bill and its possible consequences.

Proponents of Net neutrality -- including Google, Microsoft, Amazon and eBay -- want legislation so that telecom operators and broadband providers do not discriminate the delivery of content via making the Internet a two-lane system of premium services. But telecoms have argued that they should be able to charge companies who want it for faster delivery of content especially for VoIP, video over IP and TV over IP services.

The Center for American Progress held a debate earlier this week on the issues of Net neutrality hosted by Vinton G. Cerf, Google's vice president and chief Internet evangelist, and Dave Farber, distinguished career professor of computer science and public policy at the Carnegie Mellon University.

Both experts argued that the act is not efficiently debated on in Congress.

"We need to sharpen the focus of what we talk about on the Hill; right now there is too much noise and not enough facts in digestible form," Farber said.

Adding to that, Cerf said that the list of governmental officials who

"don't get it is longer than the list of those that do get it." The big problem is dealing with those that don't get it, and helping them get educated, he explained, noting that the worst-case scenario for the future of the Internet would be that there is no legislation at all.

If legislation is not enacted, there is a high risk we won't have the open Internet we have had, Cerf said.

While there currently is a concern regarding freedom on the Internet, this has not always been an issue, according to Cerf.

He pointed out that in the past the Internet has supported new applications that the public did not need permission to try. People have been able to try out applications with little or no constraint; it is the framework in which the net was built, he added.

Farber also noted the need to start re-regulating and get back to where we were before. Jeannine Kenney, senior policy analyst at the Consumers Union, similarly underscored the need for the rules to be reinstated.

The Senate and House bills have problems, but fixing the Net neutrality issue would be a major improvement, said Ben Scott, policy director for the Free Press, adding that the bill could be fixed quite easily, and once it is it's good to go.

"It is essential that Net neutrality be incorporated into the bill," Kenney said. "It must include non-discrimination principles as well."

Proponents say the concern over Net neutrality has existed long before now, almost a year ago when the Federal Communications Commission stripped it away.

"This was very poor judgment," said Scott. "Congress needs to change this." He also added that the FCC is not taking the issue of Net neutrality seriously enough.

Cerf addressed the fact that the FCC's shift to support the Telecom Act will lead to the loss of the common carriage. The idea of the common carriage has existed for some time and has served us well; we should not limit this, he added.

There is no way that the Telecommunications Act is defending the record of carriers, we want to make sure that Congress and the government don't lead us down the wrong path, said Farber.

According to Scott, the language of the Telecommunications Act does not currently protect Net neutrality.

The House and the Senate aren't adequately addressing the Telecommunication Act, according to Robert D. Atkinson, president of the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation. However, he added that the act of doing nothing might be the most beneficial.

Net neutrality is a defensive measure to prevent prospective harm, but we don't know what that harm could be, said Atkinson.

Conversely, Cerf pointed out that the act is clearly causing a potential hazard; it could lead to unfair and potentially abusive control of the Internet.

The main issue is ensuring that the people have choices, Farber added. Furthermore, he said that it is important to protect the users against companies; it is not necessarily about protecting companies against companies.

Without Net neutrality we don't have the guarantee that dominant companies won't impede competition, Kenney also said.

"On Capitol Hill it has become a debate between large corporations, it is not about common interest or the public good," said Carl Malamud, senior fellow and chief technology officer at the Center for American Progress.

Kenney noted that Telecom companies have a long history of discrimination; if they can make it more difficult for other companies to compete, they will do it.

The government tends to put corporate special-interest groups ahead in line of public interest, said Scott.

Conversely, he pointed out that the most important goal for the Free Press is the public interest. Cerf also emphasized that he was representing not just Google but also users of the Internet.

Rayne Guilford, deputy director of Digital Promise, also expressed a strong interest in the public.

"Regardless of how the Internet is regulated, our focus is on education," said Guilford.

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