

# Net Neutrality Debate Goes Wireless

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At the Voice Over Network (VON) show this week in San Jose, the net neutrality debate shifted to the wireless spectrum. How much control should wireless carriers have over their "unwired mile" of the Internet?

Tuesday's general session at VON was supposed to be about net neutrality and policies that both Wall Street and the public could accept, or at least live with.

Needless to say, those policies weren't really agreed upon - or even clearly articulated - by the panelists, which included Link Hoewing, assistant vice president of Internet and Technology Issues for Verizon, Christopher Libertelli, senior director of Government and Regulatory Affairs for Skype, Mike McCurry, the co-Chair of Hands Off the Internet and former press secretary for Bill Clinton, and Rick Whitt, Washington telecom and media counsel for Google. Blair Levin, the managing director at Stifel, Nicolaus & Company, moderated the discussion.

Google's Whitt kicked off the conversation with a brief discussion of the "big dumb pipe" model of the Internet. However, he maintained that the perfect network should also contain what he described as "intelligence," or the ability to discern between - and deliver content to - a wide variety of platforms.

"I think you can have a big pipe, but you also need to have intelligence," Whitt said. "From Google's perspective, we think it's ultimately going to be a mix of things."

"We see a platform, and we want our applications to be on as many as possible...fixed and mobile," Whitt added. "We also want to see an ecosystem of different providers. To our way of thinking, most companies have to be progressive enough to say: 'we don't know everything,' and open things up for others to make applications...that can be beneficial."

Whitt also elaborated more on the company's recent "Should we care?" remark concerning net neutrality, saying that for now, it is (and should be) an important topic to discuss.

He also conceded that the contentious issue might indeed work itself out in the next 10 to 20 years through simple market competition in a manner similar to what Google's Senior Policy Counsel, Andrew McLaughlin, described at the Tech Policy Summit in San Jose.

At the summit, McLaughlin was quoted as saying that "Net neutrality will ultimately be solved by competition in the long run."

But as Tuesday's debate progressed, the focus turned from the theoretical net neutrality policies to a face-off between Libertelli and Hoewing concerning the recent FCC filing that Skype and others submitted earlier this month. The document asks the FCC to "confirm a consumer's right to use Internet communications software and attach devices to wireless networks," Libertelli explained.

If granted, the petition would allow independent providers like Skype to offer bandwidth-intensive IP services over a cellular carrier's high-speed networks. Overall, Libertelli argued that cellular operators, like Verizon, are deliberately trying to restrict access to Internet applications such as Skype.

The petition also argues that the FCC should apply what's called the

Carterfone ruling of 1968 to today's wireless networks. That ruling made it legal to attach equipment that didn't belong to the phone company to the public network, as long as it didn't damage the network.

"When Americans go into a Best Buy and purchase a TV, it is uncoupled from service," Libertelli said. In fact, - consumers - are buying most their electronic devices decoupled. A user can go out and, so long as it doesn't harm the network, it's okay. But not in wireless. Why is that?"

If the Carterfone ruling was indeed applied to the cellular infrastructure, it could, among other things, allow cellular customers to upload Skype's VoIP software onto any Internet-capable cellular device and make cheap or free calls via their operators' data services, bypassing their pricey voice plans.

That, in turn, could deal a heavy blow the American carriers' minutes-based and subsidized phone business models.

In fact, Hoewing said the whole issue was more about business models than net neutrality.

"I think it all goes back to business models," he said. "There's been a lot of criticism recently about cellular business models but if you look at it, they've actually encouraged investment."

Hoewing also said that there's no proof that American consumers don't prefer the current cellular models.

"I don't think there's ever going to be anything that's a perfect network," he said. "It always has to evolve, but that's what been happening in our case."

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