

Q&A: What is net neutrality and why does it matter?

June 14 2016, by Tali Arbel



In this Dec. 3, 2009 file photo, a sign outside the Comcast Center is seen in Philadelphia. A federal appeals court has upheld the government's "net neutrality" rules that require internet providers to treat all web traffic equally. Providers like Comcast, Verizon and AT&T say the rules threaten innovation and undermine investment in broadband infrastructure. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke, File)

An appeals court on Tuesday [upheld "net neutrality" rules](#) that treat the

Internet like a public utility and prohibit blocking, slowing and creating paid fast lanes for online traffic. They have been in effect for a year.

Here's a look at what the developments mean for consumers and companies:

WHAT IS NET NEUTRALITY?

Net neutrality is the principle that Internet providers treat all [web traffic](#) equally, and it's pretty much how the internet worked. But regulators, consumer advocates and internet companies were concerned about internet providers' power. For example, a broadband provider could favor its own video-streaming service at the expense of other companies.

WHAT DID THE GOVERNMENT DO ABOUT IT?

The Federal Communications Commission in 2015 proposed rules to make sure cable and phone companies don't manipulate traffic. They can't create special fast lanes for some data, like video from YouTube, or intentionally block or slow Web traffic. Many [internet providers](#) said they didn't plan to do those things, but the FCC worried that they could.

The agency will also be able to investigate complaints about "unreasonable" business practices by Internet providers that aren't explicitly banned. Broadband companies have said this invites uncertainty—they don't know what's allowed.

The FCC's previous attempt at [net neutrality](#) rules had been struck down by the federal [appeals court](#).

WHAT'S CHANGING FOR CONSUMERS?

The ruling cements the FCC's authority to regulate the internet more strictly. The agency has already proposed making it harder for broadband providers to use consumer data for advertising purposes. Experts expect that it will next address "zero rating"—when broadband providers exempt some traffic from consumer data caps, an indirect way of favoring some services over others.

WHY IS THE INDUSTRY OPPOSED?

Companies say they don't want the stricter regulation that comes with the net neutrality rules. They say the regulations will undermine investment in broadband, and that it's not clear what is and isn't allowed under the greater authority the FCC has to investigate unspecified complaints.

They are also concerned about price regulation, even though the FCC says it won't preapprove prices for service.

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