

With net neutrality, researcher says 'not every deal is bad'

February 21 2017, by Jonathan Mcverry

Net neutrality advocates want to make sure internet service providers like Comcast and Verizon have minimal control over how users access content on the web. However, new, award-winning research by a Penn State College of Communications faculty member says giving these companies some leeway might not be all bad.

The project received the Meheroo Jussawalla Research Prize Award, given to the best research paper at the annual conference of the Pacific Telecommunications Council. The results from the study suggest that allowing ISPs to employ sponsored data arrangements with content providers (Netflix, Facebook, etc.) may improve [internet access](#) around the world.

"There are reasonable ways and unlawful ways for carriers to favor their own traffic," said Rob Frieden, the Pioneers Chair and professor of telecommunications and law. "Not every deal is bad."

Many countries in Africa take advantage of an [internet](#) subsidy provided by Facebook. Free of charge, citizens in these countries can access a limited version of the web. Their access can include government sites, Wikipedia, Facebook and other affiliated sites.

Some critics worry about American companies dominating the cyber-landscape in developing countries. Some countries, like India, have denied internet subsidies for this reason. Frieden said there are two ways to look at this issue: Is an internet subsidy good, because it provides

access to those who cannot afford it, or does the subsidy manipulate people's minds and negatively shape their culture?

"I tend to think that there's more good in having some internet than none at all," he said. "It's curated and it's limited. Sure, Facebook is not doing it as a charity, they're trying to generate revenue. But when you subsidize access in these lesser developed countries, you provide an opportunity to see what the internet is all about."

In developed countries like the United States, there is a different argument. The subsidy scenarios are designed around marketing and promotions, as opposed to necessity. Customers may get free video streaming if they order through a certain provider or use a certain device. Frieden pointed out that customers find themselves choosing services that align with the deal, instead of their preferred service.

For example, if a provider favors the music-streaming service Pandora, it may offer access to this specific service without debiting users' monthly data allowance. Customers will often choose Pandora, because it helps them conserve their data allowance rather than preference. This may not be ideal for competition in the marketplace, but Frieden says it can also benefit consumers.

"Providers like Comcast spend billions of dollars investing in its infrastructure," he said. This includes "frequent upgrades to ensure high quality and up-to-date technology like faster speeds, higher definition and the ability to handle more traffic."

He said he worries that the more that these companies are regulated, the less incentive they have to evolve and stay current. On the other hand, some government regulation may be necessary to ensure that internet carriers do not deliberately degrade specific services, such as Netflix, as a way to extort additional compensation.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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