

India's biggest e-tailer scraps plans for free access

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India's largest e-commerce portal Flipkart scraps plans to offer free access to its app after getting caught up in a growing row over net neutrality

India's largest e-commerce portal Flipkart on Tuesday scrapped plans to offer free access to its app after getting caught up in a growing row over net neutrality.

Flipkart had said it would waive data charges for [users](#) of its app—a controversial practice known as "zero rating"—in a deal with India's main telecom operator Airtel.

But the move sparked an angry backlash among Internet users in India, who said it would give Flipkart an unfair advantage over its competitors and threatened to boycott the company.

On Tuesday Flipkart said it had scrapped its plans after "a great amount of debate, both internally and externally, on the topic of zero rating".

The criticism of Flipkart has fed into a broader debate on whether Internet service providers should be allowed to favour one online service over another for commercial or other reasons—a

concept known as "[net neutrality](#)".

India's telecoms regulator launched a consultation last month to determine new rules surrounding net neutrality, which the United States recently enshrined in law.

Bollywood superstar Shah Rukh Khan is among dozens of celebrities who have signed up to a campaign using the hashtag #savetheinternet and more than half a million people have emailed the regulator to urge it to protect net neutrality.

Supporters of net neutrality say it guarantees Internet users can roam freely online and prevents any effort to stifle expression.

Airtel was earlier forced to withdraw plans to impose higher data charges for using Internet telephony services such as Skype following widespread criticism.

Indian telecom operators say they are losing voice and text revenue to Internet applications that allow users to communicate at much cheaper costs.

India's telecoms minister Ravi Shankar Prasad indicated on Monday the government would support net neutrality.

"We feel that Internet is one of the finest creations of the human mind. It should have linkages with the common man in a non-discriminatory manner," Prasad told reporters.

India has an estimated 185 million mobile Internet users according to a 2013 report by Mobile Landscape Survey, a US-based market research company, making it the world's third-biggest market after US and China.

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