

Net Neutrality: Changing the Future of Internet Access

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The Internet is boundless: any given minute, Internet users can access whatever they want. For example: update your Facebook status with a link to Youtube video that's a hilarious trailer to an awful horror film from the '80s that you read about on Wikipedia and then go Skype your bestie about it. Internet users carelessly hop from one thing to the next with ease: this limitlessness is why users love it and use it constantly. Users have come to rely on this relationship, but there is some conflict behind the scenes that may change it soon.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) recently approved a set of rules to regulate network neutrality. For those unfamiliar with the concept, Wikipedia defines net neutrality as "a principle proposed for users' access to networks participating in the Internet. The principle advocates no restrictions by Internet service providers and governments on content, sites, platforms, the kinds of equipment that may be attached, and the modes of communication." More basically, net neutrality is the idea that Internet service providers should not be allowed to limit user access through censorship or high prices. A complex web of legal issues, engineering challenges, and economic forces that the average Internet user never

considers keep an open Internet running and currently these different factions are competing to determine how internet access will be regulated.

FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski said that the rules "were designed to achieve the commission's many objectives: to protect consumers, to spur innovation, to encourage investment in broadband and technology." As agreeable as the description of the rules sound, there has been much opposition. Dissenters of these rules believe the FCC is overreaching with too much regulation. Net neutrality advocates believe the rules don't reach enough and should enforce stricter rules.

According to the New York Times subject page on the issue, two controversies fuel the conflict. The first is whether Internet service providers may block consumers' access to websites, which in its strictest forms would infringe on the right of free speech. The second deals with cost. Can Internet service providers charge content providers a fee to reach consumers or charge consumers different prices for different speeds? Analysts are generally in agreement that blocking access to websites is prohibited. Tiered or prioritized content packages that charge more or less based on data use may or may not be allowed, but charging consumers for higher speeds is okay. The question still remains if any of these rules will apply to the

image via appleinsider.com

mobile web.

Columbia Law Professor Tim Wu, credited with coining the term "network neutrality," predicts, "an Internet experience ever more divided by whether you pick up your laptop or your phone." Why bother with cable and phone service if you can watch tv and make calls for free online? The phone and cable companies feel as if they are getting the cold shoulder and for this reason would like to charge extra on services like Youtube, Hulu, and Skype to reach subscribers on a "fast lane." But it's unclear if these fast lanes will even be legal.

As the conflict continues to swell, the future of net neutrality

remains uncertain. But what does remain certain is that FCC's new laws will be challenged in court while many uninformed Internet users continue to update their Facebook statuses. Neutral internet access may be the current standard, but soon users could be charged more to stream video or download software. If citizens want to keep it that way, they should start voicing their opinions to government officials that will play a large role in shaping the laws that determine the internet's future. For now, here's to the internet as President Barack Obama describes it should be, "open and free."

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