



Report: Net Neutrality Could Kill ‘E-Health’ Plans

Posted by Anne Broache

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For years, we’ve been hearing about the need for a tech-savvier American health care system that could make paper health records, prescriptions, X-rays and even in-person checkups into relics. But all of that could be derailed unless U.S. policymakers reject calls for so-called Net neutrality regulations, a new report warns.

That’s the position of the U.S. Internet Industry Association (USIIA), a 13-year-old trade association that represents “companies engaged in Internet commerce, content and connectivity.” Verizon is the biggest name represented on its board of directors, which also includes representatives from ServInt, a maker of “virtual private servers;” and Internet Colorado, a small ISP. (I requested a complete listing of its members, but USIIA did not respond to my request by press time. Update 10:45 a.m. PDT: A USIIA representative said the group has a “non-disclosure policy” for those names.)

“American consumers should not be forced to accept a ‘one-size-fits-all’ broadband service that places critical medical monitoring and health care on the same footing as music and video downloads or noncritical communications,” says USIIA president David McClure in a report titled “e-Health and America’s Broadband Networks” (PDF) released Tuesday.

McClure is referring to regulations sought by Google, Amazon.com and public-interest groups that would prohibit network operators like AT&T and Comcast from charging premium fees to content providers for priority placement of their content. Some legislative proposals on the table have called for allowing prioritization of network traffic within particular classes of data, but extra fees would be banned. That would seem to mean that a company like Verizon could choose to set aside a dedicated pipe for all usergenerated

video content, but it would have to make that pipe available to all usergenerated video Web sites in existences, and without extra charges.

In their fight against Net neutrality laws, telecommunications and cable companies have mainly argued they need the freedom to explore new business models to offset costs associated with building the latest, greatest broadband infrastructure. But the health care argument isn’t exactly new, either.

One of the things that broadband providers like Verizon have said they hope to offer to hospitals and health-care providers in greater quantities is “virtual private networks” dedicated to potentially high-bandwidth operations like sharing health records and

monitoring patients from afar. They claim Net neutrality regulations would essentially outlaw those plans.

So what about carving out an exception to those rules for Internet traffic related to critical health information? On a conference call with reporters Tuesday morning, McClure said that just wouldn't make sense.

“Where do we stop?” he asked. “How many carve-outs do we have to have? A carve-out for 911 telephone calls over VoIP (voice over Internet Protocol)? Do we do another carve-out for government services which can be considered critical and emergency services?”

Advocates for Net neutrality mandates were quick to pounce on USIIA's stance, though Paul Misener, Amazon.com's vice president for global public policy, acknowledged there are “legitimate reasons for prioritizing critical applications.”

“We just don't want network operators like Verizon (USIIA's principal sponsor) to prioritize consumer communications with some health care providers over others, depending on which pays them the most money,” he said in an e-mail interview.

“Network neutrality is about prohibiting discrimination, preserving consumer choice and, in this example, keeping the network operators from becoming virtual HMOs that determine which doctor, which hospital, or which clinic gets favored treatment.”

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