

Villarreal: Don't Let Internet Neutrality Stifle Innovation

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'We haven't found any concrete evidence of abuse, but intelligence tells us that they're planning malicious attacks while playing innocent. Certainly, a preemptive strike is our only safeguard against a serious assault that could change life as we know it.'

No, it's not a satirical take on the Bush administration's rationale for war; it's the emerging Democratic policy position on "net neutrality" — Internet regulations that would outlaw the use of "smart" network technologies and require that broadband networks handle all Internet traffic as passive "dumb pipes," effectively turning Internet service into a utility much like electricity. Though there are certainly important issues at stake as we seek to expand our broadband networks, Democrats would be well advised not to mimic the Bush administration's impetuous push for preemptive strikes in the digital world.

For months, prominent Democratic activists and bloggers have engaged in some heated chest-thumping rhetoric, warning that a wave of censorship — disappearing emails, blogs and interruptions of interactive video sites like YouTube — is imminent unless we pass net neutrality legislation.

Chanting slogans like "Protect Internet Freedom" and "Save the Internet," the so-called progressive netroots have convinced many that the telephone, cable and wireless providers will start blocking content on the Web that they don't like or which competes with the content with which broadband providers are affiliated.

Certainly, any kind of censorship on the internet would be alarming. A truly democratic and global medium, the Internet has connected everyone on a horizontal platform that allows powerful ideas to spontaneously explode and permits information and conversation in various media to flow without a filter.

But, in reality, there are no examples of censorship that need fixing, and none seem likely to occur since even false accusations of blocking can cause Internet service providers a public relations nightmare and send customers running to the arms of their competitors. In fact, the one example of an ISP actually blocking an Internet telephone application was quickly resolved by the Federal Communications Commission.

This hasn't stopped net neutrality advocates from basing their case on hypothetical scenarios based on snippets of news quotes from telecommunications executives.

Legislating on such flimsy evidence is sure to yield dangerously imprecise results that could unintentionally block the kinds of new innovations that continue to add new value to the Internet.

For example, when everyone was laboring under dial-up speeds, cable broadband appeared and delivered much faster speeds. The technology spread across the United States and gave America new broadband speeds in part because it was not subject to regulations that many advocates identify with net neutrality. In turn, online applications like peer-to-peer and video that had languished under slow speeds found new life.

How can we adopt net neutrality regulations that are likely to limit the rate at which we are able to increase speeds and make Web applications really hum?

Carnegie Mellon professor David Farber, one of the pioneers of Internet infrastructure, noted the irony that, though net neutrality legislation is supposed to protect innovation on the Internet, the "problem is that these restrictions would prohibit practices that could increase the value of the Internet for customers."

As the Democrats formulate a forward-thinking Internet and broadband policy for America, we must protect online applications and the network infrastructure that allows these applications to work in the first place — we must cultivate the Internet as a whole. However, net neutrality could lay a wet blanket on the burning inferno of the Internet, cooling innovation in all corners.

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