



## **Reject The Latest Push For “Net Neutrality”**

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America’s leading Internet service providers (ISPs) have spent many years and billions of dollars upgrading their transcontinental networks, which constitute the backbone of the Internet. Now they are eager to profit by offering new, compelling services. One plan is to give certain websites high priority on their data, so as to guarantee “quality of service”--the speed, frequency, and reliability with which data is delivered. This would enable content providers to offer high-quality live TV and videoconferencing or advanced remote medical monitoring, without the delays and unreliability that plague the Internet today.

Unfortunately, data prioritization is fiercely opposed by advocates of “Net Neutrality”--an idea that politicians and activists unsuccessfully attempted to make into law last year, but which is now being resuscitated. U.S. senator Byron Dorgan, a leading advocate of “net neutrality” legislation--which is supported by Microsoft, Google, and many other software companies--promised last week at the Future of Music Policy Summit that the push for this legislation would continue. Americans, he said, to a standing ovation, must “fight back and say this is something that’s important for our country’s interests.”

What is exactly is net neutrality? It is the idea that ISPs should not be able to favor some types of data over others; their networks must be “neutral” among all the data they carry. Net-neutrality supporters claim that if ISPs are free to give preferential treatment to certain websites’ data, they might drastically slow down un-favored or less-wealthy websites, diminishing their ability to offer content and make innovations. A prominent net neutrality coalition cautions: “If you are an aspiring entrepreneur, you may be impeded from providing the ‘next big thing’ on the Internet.”

But such scenarios make no economic sense. For any of the nation’s competing ISPs to offer customers slow, patchy, let alone nonexistent access to the websites they seek to visit, would be commercial suicide. As for innovation, websites are free to continue using standard, non-prioritized Internet service--which ISPs would have every incentive to

preserve at appealing speeds by expanding their overall bandwidth (as they continuously do). The fact that this would be slower than premium service does not mean that it would be slow, just as UPS's decision to offer overnight delivery did not lead them to suddenly degrade their Ground shipping. Premium Internet services would enable, not stifle, innovation, by giving websites creative options they did not have before.

The specter of ISPs offering glacial access to certain websites is a smokescreen, designed to obscure the net-neutrality movement's goal: preventing anyone from having superior, unequal access to customers. In the minds of net neutrality advocates, the Internet is a collectively owned entity, to which all websites have an equal claim and are entitled "equal access." As the title of a leading net-neutrality group proclaims: "It's our Net."

But it isn't.

The Internet is not a collectivist commune; it is a free, voluntary, and private association of individuals and corporations harmoniously pursuing their individual goals. (While it began as a government-funded project, the Internet's ultra-advanced state today is the achievement of private network builders, hardware companies, content providers, and customers.) Because the Internet is based on voluntary association, no one can properly compel others for their ad space, bandwidth, publicity--or network priority. Those who create these values have the right to use and profit from them as they see fit. Google has no more right to demand that Verizon be "neutral" with its network than Verizon has a right to demand that Google be "neutral" with its coveted advertising space.

The only thing equal about the participants on the Internet is that all have equal freedom to deal with others voluntarily. This means they are equally free to compete for the bandwidth, dollars, and talents of others--but not entitled to an unearned, equal portion of them.

It is the freedom of participants on the Internet to offer and profit from whatever products, services, or content they choose that has made it such a phenomenal source of content and innovation. Net neutrality would deny ISPs that freedom. It would deny their right to engage in creative, innovative, and profitable activity with those networks--in the name of those who demand their bandwidth, but are unable or unwilling to earn it in a free market.

The widespread support for net neutrality among successful Internet companies--including Google, Microsoft, Yahoo, eBay, and Amazon--is short-sighted and contemptible. These companies, which have benefited greatly from the unimpeded freedom of the Internet, are now trying to deny the same freedom to innovative ISPs and ambitious competitors under the egalitarian banner of "equal access." This is an invitation for any clever moocher to demand "equal access" to their hard-earned resources; indeed, Google last year was sued because its proprietary search engine allegedly gives "unfair" rankings to certain companies.

The Internet is one of the great bastions of freedom and innovation in our civilization. Let us keep it that way by rejecting the latest push for “net neutrality.”

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