

Viewpoint : Dorgan Should Rethink 'Net Neutrality'

By David McClure
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Sen. Byron Dorgan, D-N.D., is a study in contradictions.

A proponent of Internet regulation - or Net neutrality - on the one hand, Dorgan has made repeated calls of late for more government control of the Internet. On the other hand, he's secured federal funds to help his constituents benefit from the latest Internet advances, such as telemedicine and distance learning. These applications that have flourished because they are not encumbered by bureaucracy and red tape.

Dorgan can't have it both ways. Net neutrality would deter the investment and growth that have led to such programs. It would make progress in telemedicine nearly impossible by removing the ability to give lifesaving medical treatments priority on the Internet. And it would stifle the kinds of innovations that have made distance learning possible.

The Internet has developed rapidly over the past decade because it has been free to do so. Free from government regulation and cumbersome laws, private companies have invested hundreds of billions of dollars to build broadband networks that can carry large amounts of data at high speeds to people's homes, offices, churches, hospitals and schools. This year alone, companies are investing \$70 billion to expand broadband infrastructure in the U.S.

This investment has led to the creation of life-enhancing programs North Dakota stands to lose should the government heed Dorgan's call to regulate the Internet.

The North Dakota Telepharmacy Project relies on broadband connections to allow the state's pharmacists to use high-speed videoconferencing to coordinate with pharmacy technicians in distant locations. This allows pharmacists to remotely approve the dispensing of prescriptions.

Failure of this project would rob North Dakota's rural residents of an efficient and cost-effective way of obtaining their prescription medicines.

North Dakota's Health IT system also would suffer. North Dakota plans to build a statewide health information technology and exchange infrastructure. Commonly known as telemedicine, this broadband service allows the sharing of digital images and medical records among health care team members, even if they're in different cities.

Telemedicine also enables the remote monitoring of chronically ill patients while trimming health care costs as much as 25 percent.

Dorgan has shown his support for the expansion of broadband services in North Dakota. He has supported legislation to expand the availability of telemental health services to rural Indian tribal communities via broadband technology. Prior to that, Dorgan praised a \$500,000 grant to UND for a tele-learning project at the UND School of Medicine. Telemedicine is one of the state's top industries - a fact certainly not lost on Dorgan.

Internet regulation would dampen the investment and innovation needed to expand and deploy the broadband networks needed to deliver critical new health care and education services. With his support of network neutrality, Dorgan not only contradicts himself, he hurts his constituents.

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