

For Hispanics, Net Neutrality Isn't Neutral At All

By Gus West

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It's hard for many of us to imagine our daily routines without high-speed access to the Internet.

We use fast broadband connections to send and receive e-mail, get news and information, pay bills, make purchases, download music and video, play games and much more. Indeed, the current generation of college students has never known a world without widespread Internet access, and many take broadband for granted.

What appears at first glance to be a universal phenomenon, however, isn't really universal at all - at least not yet - although it's rapidly moving in that direction. Today, about 47 percent of American households have broadband connections, up 17 percent over the past two years, according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project.

But the rate of broadband expansion could screech to a halt if Congress passes H.R. 5353, the Internet Freedom Preservation Act of 2008, introduced by Rep. Edward Markey, D-Mass., and Rep. Charles Pickering, R-Miss.

Passage of the bill would raise costs for broadband network providers, drive up consumer rates, stymie expansion among economically distressed and ethnic minority communities and depress job creation when the country most needs to boost employment opportunities.

The legislation would waste money on eight public broadband "summits" around the country, where participants are unlikely to learn anything new, and it would provide support for the ironically named Net Neutrality concept.

The term Net Neutrality implies unimpeded access to the Web, but in reality it is quite different. As former FCC Commissioner Rachelle B. Chong aptly put it in a recently published essay, Net Neutrality may be "a Trojan Horse for increased government regulation of the Internet."

Increased regulation could come in the form of restrictions on how network operators manage their services, which could mean higher costs for operators that would be passed along to consumers.

Without such interference, the Internet has developed in rich, vibrant ways, and consumer pricing has moved down steadily, resulting in broader access to high-speed connections in more diverse communities.

Among African-Americans, for example, 40 percent of households now have broadband connections, a leap of 185 percent in the last two years, according to the Pew report. Latinos have been slower to adopt broadband, but the appetite is there. Although just 29 percent of Hispanic households now have high-speed connections, the numbers are growing. And, according to Pew, an additional 27 percent get access in other locations, such as libraries, schools or the workplace.

The number of Latinos using broadband is growing because they recognize the importance of what the Internet brings to their lives and also because it has continued to become more affordable - critical for Latinos, whose annual household income was \$37,800 in 2006, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Beyond the concerns of Hispanics, however, all Americans ought to be concerned about tampering with a sector of the economy that has such an impact on employment. According to the Brookings Institution, 293,000 private sector jobs are created for each percentage point that broadband usage increases.

At a time when so many American families are faced with rising costs for gasoline, food and other necessities, pursuing H.R. 5353 seems unwise and fraught with unintended consequences.

Gus West is President of The Hispanic Institute in Washington, D.C. EDITOR'S NOTE: This online-only guest commentary has not been edited. Guest commentary submissions of up to 650 words may be sent to openforum@denverpost.com.