



Net neutrality protects consumers, access to the Internet

Larry Farnese

April 23, 2018

There is an old saying, "A candle does its best work in the dark." With net neutrality, it is time to strike a match, light the wick and let the candle do its job. Illumination is the key to understanding how net neutrality impacts us all.

This is especially the case after trying to reconcile arguments made in a recent op-ed published by PennLive ("This Pa. net neutrality bill is a solution in search of a problem," April 12, 2018).

It seems that my legislation (SB1033) to protect consumers, increase access to the internet and promote price competitiveness among internet service providers (ISP), raised the hackles of Thomas Fiery of the Cato Institute.

In his column, Fiery provides grist for those who see free internet access as something that could come at a cost. I disagree.

Net neutrality basically requires internet service providers to offer equal access to the internet.

In December, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) voted to dismantle regulations and eviscerate net neutrality, overturning the Obama era internet fairness rules.

Unfortunately, Fiery employs a simplistic hypothetical wrapped in ill-advised argument to draw an unsupportable conclusion.

To be clear, my bill would protect net neutrality and ensure that consumers do not face huge access costs or struggle with limited internet availability. He argues that heavy data users (i.e. popular providers) should pay more to access consumers than you and me.

My legislation is borne out of both the belief in free internet access, but also out of the fear that dismantling federal regulations would empower internet service providers to charge higher access fees for access to popular content providers and heavy data users such as Google, Amazon, Netflix and Airbnb.

In turn, these companies would pass on their costs to consumers and begin charging extra simply to search the internet and use services.

In Fiery's world, instead of a flat fee for access, consumers would likely face a hodgepodge of charges.

With internet access cost-prohibitive in some cases now, heaping an additional expense on top of what consumers pay would exacerbate the problem. Higher costs for heavy data users wouldn't solve connectivity issues; but it would result in higher costs, slower service and leave consumer access to the internet at the mercy of ISPs.

Due to the FCC's action, more consumers may be priced out of the market and rendered unable to access the internet. In this highly interactive world, additional consumer challenges and high access barriers are ill-advised and counterproductive. To prevent this situation from transpiring, net neutrality was put in place.

Critics of my plan, including Fiery, ask why should all pay the same rate while some heavy users skate relatively free of proportionate costs?

He equates this to the government suddenly announcing that you no longer have to pay your credit card bill. His example falls when -- under his scenario -- the same credit card company announces specific fees for access to specific services. Use it at a gas pump, grocery store or to buy a new shirt online, pay more.

However, if you go to a big retailer, say Walmart, you get a discount because they've paid for cheaper access for their customers. T

hat results in a skewed marketplace where big data, big retailers or the well-heeled squeeze access. This is possible because there are no protections in place to require ISPs to charge based on use, period.

I believe in balanced markets, free access and the ability of all to compete. The big thumb of big data shouldn't be able to press on the economic scale. My legislation prevents that from happening.

My bill specifically prohibits broadband internet services from blocking lawful content or services, impairing or degrading content, engaging in paid prioritization or unreasonably disadvantaging a user's ability to access content, or a provider's ability to make content available.

To press home my point, I've requested that the governor protect net neutrality in state contracts until Congress acts.

While I appreciate Fiery's interest in the issue, it is important to understand that free access should mean free. Let the consumer have access to the internet, and let them make the choice because that's what net neutrality is all about.

Free access to the internet should mean that internet access is truly free.