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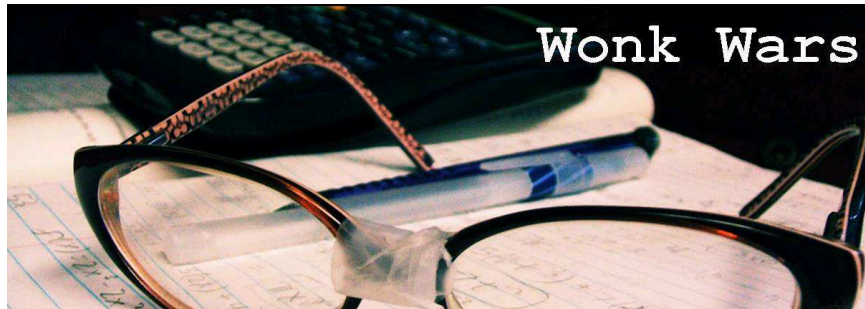## Wonk Wars: Should Government Be In The Internet Business?

True/False: Government Should Preserve Net Neutrality. Discuss!

Wednesday, October 13, 2010

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Welcome to Wonk Wars, a weekly feature from It's A Free Country as part of the Brian Lehrer Show's 30 Issues in 30 Days. Early each week, we'll post one of those issues in the Wonk Wars sections of the website and invite two or more policy experts to start the discussion online, along with your input. Then, each Thursdays, the conversation continues on-air at the Brian Lehrer Show.

This Week's True/False: The Government Should Preserve Net Neutrality

*Opening statement from **Jim Harper**, Director of Information Policy Studies at the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute.*

Net neutrality regulation is a solution in search of a problem. In the few instances where Internet Service Providers have deviated from providing wide-open Internet access, public pressure has quickly forced them to relent. This is because a cadre of technologists watches over the Internet's functioning. When problems arise, they use the Internet---it's a communications medium, after all---to send out the word. Consumers' unprecedented ability to communicate and organize helps them get what they want from ISPs.

Should the Federal Communications Commission replace this technologist-consumer dynamic with lobbyist-bureaucrat decision-making? Absolutely not. Examples from history, such as the Interstate Commerce Commission (railroads) and Civil Aeronautics Board (airlines), show that regulatory agencies end up working for the industries they are supposed to control. And remember, the FCC is a national censor, which could turn its "neutrality" efforts toward curtailing free speech.

For decades, the federal government has been interfering with advances in communications, by bottling up electromagnetic spectrum, for example, by propping up the AT&T monopoly for decades, and by requiring exhausting license-transfer proceedings when media companies want to merge or re-organize their assets. The best thing the government can do for net neutrality, and consumer welfare overall, is to get out of the way. We need more competition, not more regulation.

Opening statement from Josh Silver, president and CEO of Free Press.

The Internet has always operated under Network Neutrality, the principle that guarantees that Internet service providers like Comcast and AT&T cannot indiscriminately block or slow down Internet content. Net Neutrality keeps the Internet open and protects free speech and consumer choice online. It means everything is treated equally, whether it's ABC News or your sister's blog.

Net Neutrality is the opposite of a government takeover of the Internet. In fact, protecting Net Neutrality is about preserving the Internet as we know it – as the most amazing resource for economic innovation and democratic participation. A non-neutral Internet means that ISP's could carve up the Internet into fast and slow lanes, picking winners and losers online, and deciding which Web sites and applications get preferred treatment. These companies want your online experience to look a lot more like cable TV – where they pick the channels for you, and you pay through the nose. They want to eliminate the revolutionary potential for any website to become the next YouTube or eBay or New York Times.

The Federal Communications Commission has the power to establish clear rules of the road to ensure that the Internet remains free from discrimination and open for all