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Our View: Neutrality on the 'net not so neutral

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September 29, 2009 12:01:00 AM

You don't want the government camel's nose under the tent of regulating the Internet.

The phrase "net neutrality" has an ingratiating appeal. Net neutrality rules proposed by the Federal Communications Commission would "prohibit Internet service providers from interfering with the free flow of information" over their networks, the Associated Press reports. Proposed rules also would "bar Internet service providers such as Verizon Communications Inc. ... from slowing or blocking certain services or content flowing through their vast networks."

What's wrong with that?

If we take the government at its word — always problematic at best — all Web traffic will be treated equally, and Internet users will have more freedom to download music, video and other services.

But to bring about a utopian desire for virtually unlimited access over a limited resource, government would require broadband providers to operate in ways not necessarily in the best interest of the companies or their paying customers.

Who doesn't enjoy access to the Internet's wealth of information and entertainment? But many have come to regard access as an entitlement. Indeed, FCC proposed regulations, open for public comment next month, are described as ensuring what "consumers are entitled to."

One difficulty with government guaranteeing entitlements at the expense of others is the problem of those who abuse the free ride. Bandwidth-hogging services such as person-to-person file sharing and downloadable video from sites like YouTube and Google strain network capacities. Broadband providers legitimately claim they have a right to regulate such traffic over their networks, which may mean giving priority to their own services or charging varying rates.

That's why large bandwidth providers such as Verizon and AT&T have opposed previous "net neutrality" proposals. Their networks would be abused. And that's why operations like Google want net neutrality mandated by federal regulations. They could offer services without sharing the whole cost to provide them over broadband networks.

What's at stake is who gets control, and who pays the cost. We believe businesses, yes even big corporations like AT&T, have a right to control what they own and to operate without financial penalty imposed by the government.

Although net neutrality purports to ensure fairness and competition, its government regulation would do the opposite, writes Adam B. Summers in The Freeman, a publication of the Foundation for Economic Education. "In the free market, competition ensures that customers receive the services they demand. Government control, by contrast, ensures that they receive whatever services the politicians and bureaucrats in power at the time deem appropriate."

As the libertarian Cato Institute concluded, net neutrality's regulatory regime "would also open the door to a great deal of potential 'gaming' of the regulatory system and allow firms to use the regulatory system to hobble

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