



## Is the Net Best Stuck in Neutrality?

By: [Emily Badger](#)  [Print](#)

Advocates of net neutrality have a debilitating disadvantage in their camp: the topic is messy and technical, with the stakes for the average Internet user lost in a web of arguments over concepts like common carriage, structural separation and data discrimination.

The [Federal Communications Commission](#) and [Congress](#) are mulling new guidelines for how the Internet will be used in the future and who can control how people access it. It seems like an odd debate to have — and one about the very core of what we think the Internet should be — a full two decades into the technology's dissemination.

But new tools, and the evolving market in which they will be deployed, are prompting questions we've never considered before. What if Web sites didn't load on a first-come, first-served basis, but according to which content providers paid the most? What if, as a wealthy Internet user, you could pay for prioritized access over your neighbors? What if your network provider, say, Comcast, could make its search engine run faster on your computer than Google's? Or block Google all together?

"Net neutrality," in short, refers to what we've had until now, a system where all Internet traffic is treated equally, where network owners move data without caring about who gets it, where it's coming from or what it contains. If we don't explicitly preserve this system, [net neutrality advocates](#) say, the Internet will lose its fundamental democratizing force.

All of this, however, doesn't translate very well to consumers, who may not appreciate the stakes until they're less hypothetical.

"It will dawn on people when they figure out that they don't own media in the way that they thought they did," said [Sascha Meinrath](#), director of the Open Technology Initiative at the [New America Foundation](#). "[When] people buy books on an Amazon Kindle, they think they own that book, but actually they don't; they own a license to buy that book on their Amazon Kindle. They can't give it to another person, or pass it on to children. There's a whole variety of different ways people are paying more money and owning less and less.

"And, eventually, people will realize this, that they've been had. But by then most of the damage will already be done."

Telecom companies, the primary opponents of net neutrality, argue that future innovation would be stifled by new regulation, and they've smartly turned the language of net neutrality on its ear. While neutrality advocates want network owners not to interfere with data, telecom companies say they want the government to keep its [hands off](#) the Internet.

Asks a biting cartoon on the site [Dontregulate.org](#): "Is the Internet really in danger? Does the Internet need

'saving'? It keeps getting faster. We keep getting more choices. And pretty soon homes will be directly connected to the fiber-optic backbone."

Building the next generation of the Internet, it continues, will be expensive, and net neutrality proponents like [Google](#) and [eBay](#) will surely want to take advantage of it.

"They plan on using a huge portion of the new bandwidth to do things like stream hi-definition movies," the cartoon continues. "They're gonna make billions. But they don't want to pay anything. And they call their plan 'net neutrality'?"

The free-market argument, which has supporters in think tanks like the [Cato Institute](#) and [Competitive Enterprise Institute](#), suggests that if telecom companies own the pipes, they ought to be able to figure out how to make money off of them.

This is where the fundamental question arises of just what we want the Internet to be. Should it be a service akin to cable TV, wherein your access is limited to the menu your cable provider offers? Or is there something about the common utility of the Internet that is so essential there should be no barriers to entry?

"Central Park in New York City was a radical departure from for-fee parks," Meinrath said. "It used to be you had green spaces owned by local communities, they had keys, and you had to pay fees to get into them. They were playgrounds for the rich. Central Park was this radical departure, it was a park for the masses, anyone can go in to use it, it's green space everyone in New York City can access. That is what we're facing on the Internet today."

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