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Aol ORIGINAL A Net Neutrality Cheat Sheet: What It Is, and Why You Should Care

by **Terrence O'Brien** on September 2, 2010 at 03:24 PM

What is Net neutrality?

Net neutrality is a principle for managing the Internet, or more specifically, *not* managing it. At its logical extreme, the ideology would forbid any restriction or regulation of the content, devices or protocols used on the Web. In practice, it suggests that users paying for a particular level of service should be guaranteed the same quality of access to all content, unencumbered by artificial restrictions. (Translation: All of our websites deliver the same speeds, be it **Hulu** or **FurniturePorn.com**, without the cable providers interfering or giving preference to certain sites.) This is, more or less, the way things operate currently. Outside a few highly publicized incidents, we essentially operate under a system of Net neutrality by default.

What's the issue with the current system?

Proponents of net neutrality worry that, because the principles are not enshrined in law, service providers may decide to give priority to certain content (or traffic) based on corporate preferences or fees. For example, if **Comcast** is allowed to absorb NBC, it could give favorable treatment to that network's site and videos, while limiting the available bandwidth to video content from, say, Fox. This is particularly worrisome for consumer advocates, because in many areas of the nation there are few options for broadband Internet access, making it difficult (if not impossible) for consumers to "vote with their wallets" against a provider that blocks or throttles data based on type, origin or content.

That sounds reasonable, so why is there any debate?

Opponents of net neutrality have called it a "**solution in search of a problem**," suggesting the issue will never actually come to a head. Service providers, especially those operating mobile networks, argue that the ability to actively manage network traffic is essential to ensuring quality service for all customers, not just data-hogs. Many fiscal conservatives also argue that regulating the Web as a utility, similar to telephone lines, will give telcos little incentive to invest in infrastructure and pursue service innovations -- since competitors could benefit from upgrades, as well.

So, this is a consumers versus big business debate?

Not exactly. Ensuring net neutrality would benefit Internet-based companies, especially small businesses and

start-ups, who could lose access to a level playing field if ISPs were to institute tiered service. Opponents to net neutrality argue that consumers may benefit from allowing providers to actively manage network traffic -- namely, in the form of protection against denial-of-service attacks and heavy data users who could cause digital traffic jams.

Who are the major players?

Proponents of net neutrality include consumer advocacy groups, Internet and software companies (including **Amazon**, **Google** and **Microsoft**), and many prominent technologists and politicians, such as **Steve Wozniak**, **Vinton Cerf**, **Tim Berners-Lee** and **Barack Obama**. Opponents count among their ranks conservative think-tanks such as the Cato Institute and the Goldwater Institute, as well as every major mobile and wired ISP, plus hardware companies like **Cisco**.

What are the major events in the battle so far?

Things really started to heat up in 2007 when **Comcast was caught blocking P2P traffic**. The incident inspired huge consumer backlash and a stiff rebuke from the FCC. However, **the federal appeals court sided with Comcast** in April of this year, ruling that the FCC had acted outside of its authority in mandating how service providers managed traffic, and that Comcast had been within its legal rights to block P2P transfers. This was a particularly huge blow to the FCC, which, in September 2009, **had proposed a set of rules** to protect net neutrality. When private negotiations between the telcos, Web companies, advocacy groups and the FCC reached a stalemate (and by some reports, collapsed) just last month, **Google and Verizon announced their own proposed compromise** on Net neutrality. The proposal has received **stiff criticism** from consumer groups and Internet companies, including Facebook and eBay, for an alleged loophole regarding vaguely defined "differentiated online services" and for the exclusion of mobile data networks from neutrality rules.

And that's where we stand today: with the two sides dug in deep, and the FCC wandering somewhere in the crossfire. FCC-moderated negotiations are, for the moment, over, and few companies have stepped up to embrace the Verizon and Google proposal. The debate will rage on, but we seem no nearer to a resolution than we did three years ago when the issue first entered the mainstream consciousness with the Comcast controversy.