

Headline Story

Obama Plans Internet Grab: FCC to Embrace 'Net Neutrality'

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Since the Internet took root as a mass communications phenomenon in the mid 1990s, a quiet war has raged in Washington over the extent to which the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) would regulate the new medium.

Until, now the Internet has been largely self-regulated, and the FCC has taken a hands-off approach.

But that could change dramatically soon if the Obama administration has its way.

During the weekend, press reports revealed a stunning development: The Obama administration will announce Monday that the FCC would propose new rules to embrace what it calls "Net Neutrality."

Obama's new Federal Communications Commission chairman, Julius Genachowski, will use a speech to the Brookings Institution, a liberal think tank, to announce the FCC proposals, according to those reports.

On the face of it, Net Neutrality appears to be a popular and fair proposal.

Genachowski will "propose new rules that would prohibit Internet service providers from interfering with the free flow of information and certain applications over their networks," according to the Associated Press.

The FCC rules "would bar Internet service providers such as Verizon Communications Inc., Comcast Corp. or AT&T Inc., from slowing or blocking certain services or content flowing through their vast networks," according to the AP.

But critics contend that the proposals are nothing more than a backdoor way for the FCC to tighten federal control over the Internet by beginning with the regulation of Internet service providers.

The battle lines over Net Neutrality have formed along partisan and ideological lines, with some exceptions.

During the presidential campaign, Obama said he would embrace Net Neutrality — a cause championed by Google and other Silicon Valley companies that don't want large Internet service providers denying or controlling their access to Internet users.

But Republicans have largely opposed Net Neutrality, suggesting self regulation has worked well.

The previous FCC chairman, Bush appointee Kevin Martin opposed Net Neutrality. He suggested it was not needed.

Conservatives see Net Neutrality as a power grab that will benefit big Internet players such as Amazon and Google while stifling smaller competitors.

The libertarian CATO Institute, in a 2004 policy analysis concluded: "The regulatory regime envisioned by Net Neutrality mandates 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 competitors. Worse yet, it would encourage more FCC regulation of the Internet and broadband markets in general."

Democrats in Congress have pushed for such controls in the past without success. In 2006 House Democrats offered an amendment to make Net Neutrality law, but the motion failed.

At the time Republicans warned of efforts to control the Internet.

"I want a vibrant Internet just like they do," Rep. Lamar Smith, a Texas Republican, said during the 2006 House debate over the issue. "Our disagreement is about how to achieve that. They say let the government dictate it . . . I urge my colleagues to reject government regulation of the Internet."

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