Net Neutrality: Debate or Debacle

Net Neutrality, or Internet Neutrality, is the belief that all data transmitted over the internet should be treated the same regardless of where it originated or what the content is (White, November 14, 2014). This concept is currently being hotly debated by politicians and internet business leaders. Before we can determine on which side we fall on the this debate, it would help to understand what the implications of the principle of Net Neutrality actually are. Once we have a good grasp of what the effects of Net Neutrality will be, we can decide whether or not to give our support to it’s cause.

One effect of Net Neutrality is that Internet Service Providers, or ISPs, would treat low bandwidth data like email or SMS the same as they would video streaming data, which requires much more bandwidth (White, November 14, 2014). Since video streaming takes up more bandwidth than does email or SMS messages, it creates more traffic and takes up more network resources. It would be in the ISP’s interest to lessen the amount of customer access to content that requires faster speeds and creates network traffic. Moreover, it would be profitable for the ISPs to change the cost to the consumer of accessing high bandwidth data. Indeed, ISPs might be best served drastically limiting or completely blocking high bandwidth content altogether.

Beyond the cost issue for ISPs and their consumers, Net Neutrality can affect both the future of the internet and the economies which are supported through the internet (White, November 14, 2014). Since all data is treated the same, free and fair digital market competition is possible. Without Net Neutrality, large wealthy corporations would be given faster transmission speeds, while smaller start-up companies would have slower speeds and suffer as a consequence.

In addition to encouraging a free digital market, the further development of the American digital infrastructure relies on Net Neutrality. Currently ISPs compete for customers by offering better digital service, including wider networks and faster speeds (White, November 14, 2014). This competition between ISPs incentivizes the evolution of better technology and improved infrastructure. Without Net Neutrality, ISPs could simply charge more for a select few popular sites or sites requiring faster speeds and perhaps even prohibit access to cites that would not be profitable for them.

Considering that Net Neutrality encourages the development of American infrastructure, supports free and fair competition, and protects customers from IPSs that would raise the price of high traffic content over low traffic content, why would anyone want to eliminate Net Neutrality? The answer is simple: Profit. ISPs want to maximize their profits and as such would like to be able to charge more for high traffic services and websites. Established corporations and websites like Google, Netflix, and Facebook would no longer have to compete with start-ups or the “next best thing” on the market (White, November 14, 2014). When Obama recently called for regulating the internet, the Chief Operating Officer at AT&T responded in retaliation that they would cease a plan to extend the provider’s fiber network to over 100 cities (White, November 14, 2014).

As a consumer, it makes more sense to side with Net Neutrality than with the ISPs and large corporations. First, the cost of internet access will be regulated. Second, our economy and infrastructure benefits from fair competition. Third, and most importantly, the ISPs will not be able to influence which internet content can be accessed at their discretion. Personally, I am in favor of an open internet.

References

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