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Critical Intervention

Every functioning member of society is dependant on the Internet. Whether it’s direct use for news consumption, social media, or navigation assistance, or indirect use through credit card payments and finance management. The Internet provides the invaluable service of global connectivity and should not be taken for granted. Societies use for the Internet has gone through several stages. From the 1960’s to 2000, the focus was on growth, development, and creativity (Palfrey 981). Governments across the world for the most part didn’t filter information or regulate its use in any way. This “cyber space” was seen separate from society, having no impact on events or purpose in the real world. As usage became widespread and content more easily accessible, people came to realize its importance. At this point, “states and others came to think of activities and expression on the Internet as things that needed to be blocked or managed in various ways” (Palfrey 985). For the Internet to reach its full potential and provide maximum benefit, our government must regulate the infrastructure, minimally restrict access to content, and promote privacy of the individual.

All legislation and regulation of the Internet by United States government should encourage competition in the Internet service provider market. “Internet service providers deploy routers and fiber in order to build and maintain their parts of the Internet”(Claffy and Clark 466). This infrastructure enables the provider to develop a range of internal platforms to utilize or sell to other companies that build specific services for their users. Internet service providers, such as Comcast, utilize the internal platforms through additional services such as telephone and cable television. However, today’s market has gradually shifted to a single Internet Protocol platform. Companies are using the Internet service provider’s infrastructure platform to offer similar television and phone services using the Internet.

These companies are able to undercut the Internet service provider on prices because they don’t have to pay to maintain and develop the infrastructure. Net neutrality laws force the Internet service provider to charge a flat rate to these companies regardless of their usage. The current model where services are packaged separately “may be the only way to recover the costs of operating the underlying infrastructure in a competitive market” (Claffy and Clark 468). When the Internet service providers loose money from being undercut by companies like Netflix, the user is forced to pay the difference on their Internet bill (Claffy and Clark 477). Netflix and other under cutters have such a high profit margin because they pay an extremely low rate relative to the bandwidth they use. Net neutrality is a great short-term plan, but its long-term sustainability is questionable.

The best option for long-term sustainable competition is for Internet service providers to charge relative to the amount of data consumed. This model has already proven itself in the cellular Internet market. Cellular companies such as Verizon and AT&T initially offered unlimited cellular data usage for a flat rate several years ago when smartphones first hit the market. Soon after, those companies realized that the price model was not sustainable due to an increasing infrastructure cost and total number of users. All cellular companies now charge relative to the amount of data consumed. If applied to the Internet service provider market, this model would eventually lower the cost of Internet access for users causing more users to enter the market. For the Internet to become affordable to everyone, the government must get rid of net neutrality.

Another way for the government to maximize the benefit of the Internet is to regulate content. The ideal amount of information that should be regulated is constantly changing as the Internet evolves. This means the United States government needs to constantly strive towards the ideal, keeping in mind the dangers of oversensorship and our constitutional right to freedom of speech.

Filtering of information widely varies between each country. China is the prime example of extreme of information control. They “institute by far the most intricate filtering regime in the world, with blocking occurring at multiple levels of the network and covering content that spans a wide range of topic areas” (Palfrey 986). China even uses these filters to control political issues, such as increased blocks leading up to the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square protests in 2009 (Palfrey 989). This large scale filtering still proves only mildly successful, as proxy servers are constantly being created and updated to circumvent the blocks.

China level filtering is obviously not the ideal. This does however provide a reference for what we should strive to prevent. Any information that is filtered should be to protect the rights of the citizens. Currently the United States has extensive filtering for child pornography. This is justified because it directly protects the rights of children. The United States also regulates “what children can see in libraries and schools, as one means of limiting access to information deemed harmful to them” (Palfrey 987). As the Internet evolves and becomes ingrained in society, the United States will have to reassess what information is acceptable to filter while having our constitutional rights in mind.

Our Government must regulate the Internet to protect its citizens right to privacy. Although our right to privacy is not absolute, it is a necessity. Joseph Kupfer argues that “Privacy is necessary for an efficacious self-concept and an efficacious self-concept is in turn required if one is to be an autonomous self” (Bowie and Jamal 325). He proves this claim by providing evidence showing “that people who are deprived of control over their lives, in nursing homes, prisons, and hospitals, lose the sense of themselves as origins of thought, purpose, and action” (Bowie and Jamal 325). Because privacy is essential to defining ones self, we must do everything in our power to protect it.

The Internet will inevitable breach the individuals right to privacy, however, this breach can be limited significantly. The FTC currently enforces a privacy policy; unfortunately this policy lacks specifics on how information can be used once the user gives permission. For example, users of the etrade marketplace eBay must provide specific information such as name, address, age, social security number, and bank account number in order to use the service. All items sold by the user and a personal profile containing interests, feedback, and other personal details is disclosed to the advertisers of eBay for a profit (Bowie and Jamal 337). All information disclosed is detailed in eBays privacy policy that each user agrees to, however, the privacy policy is long and complicatedly worded. This policy gives users a false sense of security and should be regulated more closely.

To combat companies that disclose information for a profit, the United States government should create new legislation for a voluntary privacy seal. This would allow any consumer concerned about their privacy rights to find all the information the website discloses in a short, bullet format (Bowie and Jamal 338). Consumers need to know what specific information the website is sharing. Just like how patients prescribed medication are made aware of the side effects, websites should notify the user how they disclose their personal information. Privacy is not something that should be taken lightly. It is critical for the Internet to reach its full potential.

In conclusion, legislation and regulation of the Internet by United States government should encourage competition in the Internet service provider market, regulate content with an aim to protect the citizens constitutional rights, and promote privacy across the web through a voluntary privacy seal system that informs users what personal information the website discloses. The Internet is a useful tool integrated into almost every part of society that will only increase in popularity and functionality. In order for citizens to gain maximum benefit out of this tool, the United States has to regulate its function and constantly update legislation to keep up with the rapid evolution.

Works Cited

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