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Social Issue and Web Science

      Net Neutrality is one of the most hotly debated social issues of 2018. President Trump's FCC chairman, Ajit Pai, made the motion to repeal the 2015 Obama era Internet regulations mid last year. In order to understand the issue of Net Neutrality, one must first understand what both camps are advocating for. Proponents of Net Neutrality argue in favor of Government protection of the consumer in suburban and rural areas where there are limited choices for ISPs. Take for example my hometown of Mahwah NJ. In my town there are multiple apartment/town house communities. Despite housing a significant portion of the Mahwah populace, these condo housing areas only have 1 or 2 ISPs that provide phone, Internet, and TV to consumers. Many fear that the repeal of Net Neutrality will allow these 'regional monopolies' to throttle speeds at the expense of the consumer, who might not be able to afford or want to pay for faster speeds. With no other competitors in the area, providers like Optimum will be able to piecemeal coverage to maximize profits. Other proponents of Net Neutrality argue that in an era where politics are becoming more and more emotional and opinionated, free speech and free press are in danger. ISPs with a politically backed agenda could block Conservative consumers from viewing websites like Fox News or Breitbart, or block Leftist consumers from viewing sites like CNN, MSNBC or Buzzfeed. Right or Left, Republican or Democrat, free speech, as an important Constitutional cornerstone, is in danger. And, if ISPs exist as regional monopolies, they could leverage their power over the consumer to restrict or stall the content they view.

      Moving towards the anti Net Neutrality camp, opponents say the existence of said regulations stifle growth. Prior to the repeal of Net Neutrality, ISPs were able to leverage the power of government to influence the presence of competitors. This is most notable with Google Fiber attempting to establish a presence Kansas City and the outlying rural areas. Google is attempting to disrupt the status quo with its Gigabit/s internet service. However, according to ArsTechnica, an online tech magazine, "the Alphabet-owned ISP hit roadblocks in several places, including lawsuits filed against local governments by AT&T, Charter, and Comcast" [1]. Net Neutrality was a double edged sword for ISPs. With the laws in place, they were able to leverage federal power to influence the existence of competitors to their advantage; however, due to the 'neutrality' laws, the expansion of existing coverage was limited. Essentially, net neutrality witnessed the stagnation of Internet infrastructure innovation. In addition, to counter those who argue regional monopolies will lock down on suburban and rural areas to stomp out competition, with Net Neutrality gone, ISPs can no longer use bureaucratic power to limit the existence of competitors. The Free Market can run its course and allow the consumer to negotiate prices by going to alternative "mom and pop" local ISPs that service smaller areas and offer more flexible pricing. In the long run, competition is what brings down costs while improving quality of service. And a counter to the "piecemealing service packages", that makes a lot of sense from a

market standpoint. Let's say as it stands you the consumer pay $50/month for your internet service through Verizon. If Verizon were to say they were going to break their internet service up into various packages, i.e. a basic browsing package, social media package, movie streaming/ gaming package, etc. and charge various rates for them, you would simply purchase what you use the most. If you're a power user and need all 3 products, then buying all 3 would come to that same $50. But if you're just interested in sending emails to family and doing basic Google searching, there's no reason why you should be paying $50/month. Allowing users to pay for what they use allows people who are not as reliant on the Internet to pay less than those who are actively using hundreds of gigabytes of data per month.

Despite Net Neutrality being a hotly debated topic, the FCC narrowly repealed the Obama administration regulations. So far, 22 states including such as California, Montana, New York, New Jersey and Kentucky have motioned to sue the FCC to attempt to reverse the decision. Many individuals are unaware of the current status of Net Neutrality, and are often misled or given false information by biased news sources. A potential solution to the problem of misinformation about Net Neutrality, could be a centralized source for anything pertaining to the subject. The website/app would pull data from sites like C-SPAN to present facts and only the facts about the current progress of the lawsuit, if it even goes through. Additionally, the app could use the user's location data to search for local ISPs that can serve as an alternative to the Goliath Internet companies like Comcast and Optimum. It would crawl through a web search and aggregate a list of ISPs that service the user's area. This would encourage people to seek out cheaper and often more robust Internet access for a more localized experience, plus it would stimulate small businesses and grow local economies. The app could be called Find My ISP, which would do all of the above features and possibly include Twitter integration to track who in the country is talking about Net Neutrality and what the opinions of users are.

Sources:
[1]: https://arstechnica.com/information-technology/2017/03/google-fiber-reportedly-canceling-installations-in-kansas-city/