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Protecting the Internet

Since it's widespread adoption in the late 1990's, the Internet has become a staple in every single thing that normal Americans do. Working, communicating with friends and family, and even entertainment are all dominated by the use of the Internet. With the service being so widely used, Internet Service Providers (ISPs) have made an innumerable amount of money selling service to subscribers. The problem, though, is that few large companies have a natural monopoly — like power and water companies. This monopoly allows ISPs to charge high prices without providing quality service since consumers have no other viable options. Recently, some service providers, namely Verizon, have admitted to throttling traffic from certain services such as Netflix.[1] The Federal Communications Commission (FCC), in order to battle unfair throttling, proposed that the Internet be classified as a Title II public utility and would thus be related by the agency.

The media has reported that the reclassification proposal will allow the FCC to prevent Internet fast lanes. Fast lanes would allow ISPs to set up premium connections that would cost extra for higher data speeds and bandwidth. While that point is true, and a major point, the reclassification would have greater implications — namely, the FCC will have unprecedented regulative authority over the Internet.[2] Of course, the FCC only presides over the United States and cannot affect the status of the Internet in other parts of the world, but it does solidify a precedent for governing agencies to have control over the utility. Some argue that this is cause for serious concern especially considering certain brass governments that actively censor and regulate the Internet service like China and Russia.[3] As long as the FCC remains loyal to the citizens of the United States and do not unleash tyrannical regulations, Net Neutrality should be a step in the right direction for the internet as a whole. It is not uncommon, though, for laws passed in one era of history are used in a completely different manner later on. For example, the Clean Air Act was passed in 1955 is being used by the Environmental Protection Agency to battle greenhouse gasses today.[4]

Another of the major arguments against the Net Neutrality proposition is that it will kill competition amongst service providers.[5] This argument seems almost moot since large ISPs have created a natural monopoly in many areas. It has been found that up to 30% of Internet users in the United States simply cannot choose a provider since multiple providers do not exist in their area.[6] How can anyone argue that FCC regulation will kill competition when the competition does not exist? When the United Nations declares the Internet as a basic human right, and capitalism is built on competition, should there not be at least two Internet service providers in any given area? Since providing Internet has a high barrier to entry, the FCC is justified in its efforts to regulate the service and the providers.

Since Net Neutrality states that service providers cannot throttle specific services, the proposal is excellent for computer scientists and programmers. Being formally trained with computers, programmers are typically the heaviest users of the Internet and some of the more niche services such as torrents – be it legal or not. The technically inclined will not have to suffer because service providers do not like the traffic caused by torrents, online gaming, or the like. More importantly: a programmer does not have to worry about their service being bottlenecked. If I think of a great new social media but it requires a great deal of bandwidth to run, an ISP may want to slow traffic related to my service. Under Net Neutrality will prevent that from happening.

Now that torrents have been brought up, the dark sectors of the Internet start to appear. The most prominent use of torrents is software piracy (but not the only use!). Some claim that because Computer Science is required to control computers, the field can be considered an enabler of piracy and the issue could be alleviated if computer science is more heavily regulated. This statement is absolutely ludicrous. Following the logical premise, the field of aeronautical engineering enabled the terrorist attacks on 9/11 so that field should be regulated more closely. More importantly, a computer science degree is not required to write software nor to copy files for piracy though it is helpful. Any highly technical, specialized field can be used for wrongdoings; it is up to an individual, as well as their colleagues, to uphold moral and ethical standards.

In closing, I believe that Net Neutrality is a great step forward for the Internet in 2015. Internet service providers hold too much power of users who have no other viable options. Capitalism is effectively failing, and the FCC is justly intervening to protect consumers. The only reservation that I hold is the possibility that the FCC will use the public utility reclassification to censor or cloak the Internet in years to come. Only time will tell how the proposal will affect the Internet, but it almost certainly cannot hurt when it comes to service providers.

References

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