

The Debate on Net Neutrality

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The Internet has become an indispensable part of people's lives. As such, it has always been a medium where free and open content is available without anyone being able to play favorites. It was hard to imagine that the neutrality of this medium would come under debate one day.

The Internet has always been a medium where critics, political candidates, or any person who wishes to express something to the world could do so for a global audience, as quickly as any large corporation or heavy political weight can. This allowed people to build the Internet, the way it is, and limiting access to that information or increasing the cost or ability to transfer that information may change the very nature of the medium, which is a decentralized information portal, that one dissenting group's views and information may not be censored by a larger group's community standards. Non-interference from any third parties allows Internet users to engage in communication and business activities with equal treatment and opportunity to communicate with their target audience. The idea of a closed Internet would allow established persons, governments, or corporations to favor certain businesses, ideas, content, or data flow according to their own corporate, social, or economic interests. The debate about [net neutrality](#) revolves around the same concepts. Its proponents and opponents have debated a wide range of ideas that involve questions and issues regarding the very idea of information flow and accessibility and, therefore, generated a lot of public interest.

Net neutrality is basically the idea that Internet Service Providers, ISPs, must handle all online traffic on an equal basis. An ISP is neutral in providing access to its users without throttling or prioritizing particular packets of data for any purpose. The idea of net neutrality, therefore, endorses the fact that multiple tiers of accessibility should not be created by ISPs to provide faster access to say, Netflix and slower access to a smaller streaming startup, rather they should be provided the same prioritization when transmitting their data through the network (Hardy). Net neutrality favors open networks that cannot block or discriminate against any applications, or interfere with content that an individual or a company posts online. Today, the foundational principle of net neutrality is under fierce debate, where prohibiting ISPs from charging websites for preferential access to their customers based on user, content, application, website, type of attached equipment, platform, or method of communication, is being challenged, which current regulatory laws did not allow. Net neutrality laws forbade ISPs to slow down, block deliberately, or charge expenses differently for particular websites and online content (Gilroy).

In 2005, the FCC adopted [network neutrality](#) as a national policy and set up rules and regulations "to preserve the vibrant and competitive free market that presently exists for the Internet" (Dortch). The rules of Net neutrality were being debated for a decade until finally in Barack Obama's presidency, pro-net neutrality policies were put into effect. The regulations that were imposed governed three

main principles in order to support net neutrality: Lawful content cannot be blocked by any broadband provider, specific services or content cannot be throttled or slowed down by the provider, additional fee for providing prioritized data flow over the network cannot be charged from a service(Hardy). These policies, however, changed with the Trump administration, whose appointed FCC chairman, Ajit Pai, was an outspoken critic of the Obama era's net neutrality regulations. In December, the FCC Commission voted in favor of repealing Obama-era policies to allow ISPs to slow down, block, or charge extra for any particular content they deem necessary. The FCC notified the Senate and provided them with their plan to dismantle net neutrality procedures (Boboltz).

As a result of repealing net neutrality rules, broadband providers such as Verizon or Comcast will soon be able to block content, create "fast lanes" for preferred partners, or reduce the bandwidth of video-streaming services from rivals. Even under existing net neutrality rules, limits exist even on "unlimited" plans offered by Verizon. For instance, Verizon limits video streaming quality to 480p resolution on phones and 720p resolution on tablets on its cheaper subscription packages. If customers choose to upgrade, that will enable 1080p resolution on tablets and 720p resolution on smartphones for a more expensive plan, though, the highest quality 4K video standards are still blocked. Verizon blocks 4K content unless customers subscribe to an upgraded unlimited data plan. Similarly, if ISPs want they can charge a company for providing access to its users according to a plan. Bigger names in the market, such as WhatsApp or Skype, can gain an advantage over any upcoming lesser-known apps by partnering with broadband providers to offer a better experience for gamers by paying them to prioritize or subsidize their apps (Finley).

Not all large corporations are in favor of repealing net neutrality; Google Inc. is a proponent of net neutrality and repeatedly voiced support for it. In their statements, they assured me that they would "work with other net neutrality supporters large and small to promote strong, enforceable protections." Similarly, Microsoft supports net neutrality and publishes statements against any motions to repeal regulations. Their statement said: "Without an open internet, broadband internet access service providers gain the power to pick winners and losers in the internet economy outright" (Adams). Another communication service, Sprint, is of a different opinion; their statement applauded the FCC's repeal of net neutrality, which has worked to "simplify a complex and challenging issue while balancing multiple stakeholder interests in this important proceeding. Complex and vague regulations previously created uncertainties around net neutrality compliance" (Wattles).

The opponents of net neutrality, however, do not seem to agree with what they term idealistic notions from proponents. The matter of net neutrality, they argue, is more complex than it appears since not all information packets traveling through the networks are the same. Critics of net neutrality explain that to maintain the best possible service, ISPs require treating different types of network traffic asymmetrically. Many broadband providers saw government overreach to be problematic and complicated the free market with messy regulations. Opponents of net neutrality claim to be free market advocates in which the consumers' choice will decide what services they get. Charging extra for more bandwidth-demanding services allows ISPs more income sources, which leads to a larger investment in creating and upgrading faster networks (Hardy). The question asked to proponents of

net neutrality is, should a consumer who is streaming audiovisual content and another who is backing up his data to the cloud have their data slowed down equally, or would it be better as a collective experience to prioritize video streaming in this case? Slightly reducing the data backup bandwidth frees up some bandwidth for the streaming, helps maintain the image quality, and minimizes buffering delays (Hardy). Further arguments by critics contend that absolute net neutrality is not possible anyway, since multiple factors

Fig - The Effects of Net Neutrality (Source: Google Images)

-affect content distribution speeds that regulations alone cannot resolve to provide unhindered equality. The FCC now argues that regulatory overreach hindered efforts to invest further in extending broadband services to rural or underserved communities (Coren). They maintain that the benefits of regulations are not clear, whereas the costs are clear, so the economic approach also advocates for deregulation in the absence of any clear harm. It is also said that advocates of net neutrality have not in actuality witnessed how ISPs will behave since they have not experienced a free hand in this regard (Coren), and legitimate businesses do not want to risk a reputation for improper discrimination or throttling of services when there is a clear customer disregard for it (Suleyman). The other advantage for companies and consumers is that those who do not require fast internet can pay less than those who require faster access speeds, thereby protecting the average user from incurring the costs of the power user (Coren). For ISPs, it also helps prevent illegal activity if they wish to discourage illegal file swapping over their networks. Another advantage put forth by opponents is that it allows them to privilege special services, such as medical or emergency services, that require uninterrupted high bandwidth, which is something that works for everyone's collective benefit.

Arguments For Net Neutrality	Arguments Against Net Neutrality
Undemocratic and provides the ability to censor free speech	ISPs will be able to provide improved services
ISPs could enable throttling for higher-paying services	Drive back investment into the telecommunications sector and Promote Jobs
The affordability of different services will become low for end consumers	Bandwidth could be prioritized to promote better service for more demanding tasks
Discrimination against smaller businesses	Special services that require privileged data, such as medical services would benefit

Content producers will have to pay more to compete against bigger companies

Consumers with fewer requirements will be able to pay less than power users

The net neutrality proponents contend that their right to free speech or access to information suffers without regulations that ensure net neutrality. The newly proposed repeal plan by the FCC Chairman permits ISPs to block websites, whereas consumers themselves should be allowed to make that choice on their end (Borchers). From a consumer who is browsing for traveling services, if he clicks on an existing market leader's website that loads up faster compared to a new emerging business in this arena whose website content will be loading up slower, the customer can potentially lose patience, therefore smaller companies will find it difficult to compete against larger cooperate competitors, when startups would not be able to afford the quality of service purchased by the bigger company, eventually the lack of competition will ultimately affect the end-consumer. Therefore, regulations that forbid ISPs from charging more for different services help competition since the website that is paying more for prioritized services will eventually charge the end-consumer (Suleyman). Furthermore, providers that maintain their streaming services have the business incentive as well as the technical ability to slow down customers' connections if they opt for a competing service. They can manipulate and discriminate your internet traffic in favor of traffic from their preferred partner companies that have an arrangement with them (Lawrence Lessig).

Despite criticism, the overall effects of net neutrality are positive and ensure that cyberspace remains a free and open platform that helps foster democratic communication. It can be foreseen that the monopolization of information on the Internet could suppress diversity, restrict the flow of independent news sources, and hinder the generation of novel and innovative web content.

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