

What is *network neutrality*, and why should you care?

The Federal Communications Commission just enacted rules intended to assure Internet equality for all. All content would be treated equally, and so would all consumers. So why all of the hubbub, and why should you care?

Until now, the Internet has basically been unregulated, and has evolved into the present configuration of access providers (*Time-Warner, Verizon, AT&T, Comcast, etc.*), content providers (*Disney, Amazon, Hulu, etc.*), and consumers (you and I). Of course some access providers are also content providers.

It turns out that some access providers were selectively restricting the flow of data across their network circuits. *Comcast* for example, claimed this was to prevent congestion when traffic was high. But only web sites owned by *Comcast competitors* were being restricted. *Comcast* was also blocking some other types of Internet traffic, like “peer-to-peer” websites where Internet users share music and video files.

Opponents to this selective control argue that access providers should not be permitted to restrict access to certain sites. This is unfair, and it may constitute a violation of the First Amendment.

Let’s say you sell your music for download. Some Internet access providers could limit your bandwidth, making it difficult for their customers to buy your music. Or worse, they could block access to your song that criticized a competitor.

Conversely, some content providers were selectively charging for their product. *Disney*, for example, was charging access providers to deliver its content to consumers. That cost was passed on to you.

This raises another issue in network neutrality: the cost and speed of Internet access for you, the consumer. Some of the “big providers” are suggesting lowering the bandwidth, or speed, of your Internet access to the point where your broadband connection could essentially be like dial-up. To get close to present broadband speeds you would pay a premium.

We here in Southeastern Ohio are already on the wrong side of the “digital divide.” According to research from A.C. Nielsen and others, we already have slower connection speeds than the large urban centers like Cleveland and Columbus, and those connections are slower than those in many other parts of the U.S., and those connections are slower than those in technologically advanced countries in Asia. Worse yet, we pay more for our connection. And this inhibits business growth.

Medical diagnostics, legal documents, manufacturing specifications, agricultural data and entertainment, traveling the Internet at light speed, are changing our world daily. For many Southeastern Ohio residents, such connectivity is still a dream. It is either not

available or it is cost-prohibitive. That is part of why Ohio continues struggling to recover from the “Great Recession.” Budding information-age entrepreneurs are often stifled.

“Net neutrality” can help keep the big media conglomerates in check, and assure that your Internet connection is affordable and unrestricted. Therefore, I am arguing for FCC regulation of the Internet. In fact, I believe the FCC did not go far enough, because they left an enormous loophole for wireless providers. Watch out! Your wireless bill may be going up if you surf the web.