

# KEEP THE INTERNET FREE AND OPEN!

Get the Facts You Need about Network Neutrality

## WHAT IS “NETWORK NEUTRALITY”?

Network neutrality is the principle that Internet users should be able to access any web content they choose and use any applications they choose, without restrictions or limitations imposed by their Internet service provider.

For example, if you are shopping for a new appliance online you should be able to shop on any and all websites, not just the ones with whom your provider has a preferred business relationship. Or if you want to use your high-speed Internet connection to make phone calls, your provider should not be able to impede your ability to do so.

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*"This Internet may not be the one we know in the future. There are threats to it out there... Entrenched interests are already jockeying to constrain the openness that has been the Internet's defining hallmark."*

-- FCC Commissioner Michael Copps



## WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT NOW?

Congress is currently drafting a bill that would revise and update the 1996 Telecommunications Act. The current draft does address network neutrality, but the language could definitely be stronger. For example, the bill states that certain classes of Internet providers “may not unreasonably” impair, interfere, restrict or limit applications or services, but offers no definition of what is “unreasonable.”

## WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY “INTERNET APPLICATIONS”?

Put simply, an Internet application allows a computer user to send or receive data. If you’ve ever sent an email, downloaded a song, played an online video game, instant-messaged a friend or watched a video on the web, you’ve used an Internet application. If you telecommute to your job, you likely use applications to access documents on your company’s network or to participate in video conferences. As technology advances, more and more of our media will be delivered via the web. Internet applications will allow you to watch television and movies, listen to the radio, make telephone calls, play interactive video games and more – all online.

Many Internet service providers are also in the application business. They should not be allowed to prevent their customers from using competitors’ applications or charge them more for doing so. Network neutrality would also keep them from discriminating against competitors in more insidious ways – like making sure their own video applications or Internet telephone services work faster and better on their own networks than services offered by competitors.

## IS THIS A REAL THREAT?

It's not just a threat: There have already been instances of Internet providers blocking access to Internet applications that allow you to access your company's network, share files with peers – even send large attachments (like digital photos) in your email. In 2005, the Federal Communications Commission sanctioned a rural telephone company named Madison River Communications for blocking its DSL customers from making phone calls over the Internet.

Foreign governments have also sought to block certain web pages and Internet applications. In China, the government uses sophisticated software to control which websites can and cannot be accessed. Bloggers receive government warnings for writing words like 'freedom' and 'democracy.' Web searches for sensitive keywords often lead to the equivalent of an Internet black hole.

Meanwhile, the industry likes to say that network neutrality is "a solution in search of a problem." But cable Internet providers are not prohibited from discriminating against the content available using their services; therefore they could legally restrict access to any website or Internet application they choose whenever it suits their bottom-line economic, or even political, interests.

## ARE THERE LEGITIMATE REASONS WHY AN INTERNET PROVIDER WOULD BLOCK CONTENT OR AN INTERNET APPLICATION?

Yes. Internet providers should be able to block spam emails, as well as viruses that could harm their networks and their customers' computers. But industry interests argue that they should be able to block anything that interferes with "quality of service." That definition is too broad: it's possible that a provider could decide to block Google or Yahoo in favor of its own search engine, saying it's in the interest of better "quality of service."

## WHAT ARE SOME WAYS I MIGHT BE AFFECTED?

Providers can restrict or disrupt your access to web content and applications in a variety of ways, including:

- Discriminating Against Competitors' Services: A provider could make sure that preferred content or applications load faster and more efficiently while competing services are slow or spotty. That would effectively create a tiered Internet – with a fast lane for those who will pay, and a slow lane for everyone else.
- Limiting Diversity of Content: A provider could enhance its own web content and services by featuring prominent menus, program guides, start screens, etc. while systematically excluding competing content.
- Favoring Commercial Services: The nonprofit and noncommercial sector could be distinguished from the for-profit sector of the online community in terms of services offered, and would suffer because they cannot compete in an environment where they have to pay for better service.
- Restricting Internet Telephone: Services that allow you to make low-cost, long-distance telephone calls using a high-speed Internet connection (sometimes called VoIP, or Voice over Internet Protocol) are becoming more and more popular. But traditional phone companies who are now getting into the Internet business don't want to lose their customers to Internet phone companies like Vonage and Skype. However, there is nothing stopping them from blocking their competition from using their network.



## WHERE CAN I FIND OUT MORE?

Center for Digital Democracy: [www.democraticmedia.org](http://www.democraticmedia.org)

Common Cause: [www.commoncause.org/telecom](http://www.commoncause.org/telecom)

Consumers Union: [www.hearusknow.org/internet/whatsatstake/openaccessandcontent/](http://www.hearusknow.org/internet/whatsatstake/openaccessandcontent/)

Public Knowledge: [www.publicknowledge.org](http://www.publicknowledge.org)

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