Net Neutrality

By Danielle Dennie
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During a labour dispute in 2005, the Internet Service Provider (ISP) Telus blocked its subscribers from accessing "Voices for Change," a pro-union Web site.[1] Some would call this censorship. However, it also falls within a much broader issue known as network (or net) neutrality, an issue of economic, technical, cultural and political importance.
Net neutrality "concerns whether or not the owners and providers of broadband network infrastructure (e.g. cable and DSL Internet providers) should be permitted to interfere with Internet traffic by blocking, degrading, or alternatively, providing preferential access to, Internet content and applications of various types."[2] The future of the Internet is at stake, and key players are at odds as to whether government policy makers should regulate the Internet in favour of net neutrality.

Opponents of regulation

Opponents of net neutrality regulation are mostly represented by telecommunications and cable companies. These companies argue that net neutrality regulation would hinder their ability to perform network management, which can be necessary to block, filter or inspect networks for malicious viruses or spam, or to limit congestion by certain types of bandwidth intensive traffic (such as P2P file sharing or video streaming). Unfortunately, network management can also lead to market abuses, as content or applications from competitors can be degraded or blocked by ISPs favouring their own services.

Another contentious issue is the desire for ISPs to levy surcharges from subscribers or content providers. However, surcharges can lead to the tiring of the Internet where companies or individuals who have the ability to pay will see their Web sites load faster. Presenting evidence in front of the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology, Michael Geist stated: "imagine a world in which Chapters cannot compete in the online book space because its content is on the slow lane while Amazon is on the fast lane." This scenario could also see user generated content (blogs, etc.) consigned to the slow track while those who are in a position to pay will have their content reach the end-user faster.[3]

Proponents of regulation

In 2005, 1,5 million people signed a petition that was sent to the U.S. Congress advocating for net neutrality regulation and a free, democratic, open Internet. This coalition represents diverse factions of society, from large content providers, such as Google, Amazon and Microsoft, to members of associations and civil society such as the American Library Association.[4]

Common carriage

Proponents argue that discrimination could be eliminated by applying common carriage regulation to the Internet, a regulation created a century ago as a response to market abuses and anti-competitive behaviour by telegraph companies. Common carriage regulation is in Canada's Telecom-munications Act (1993), Sec. 27(2): "no Canadian carrier shall, in relation to the provision of a telecom-munications service or the charging of a rate for it, unjustly discriminate or give an undue or unreasonable preference toward any person, including itself, or subject any person to an undue or unreasonable disadvantage."

Higher Education Advocacy

But the Internet is more than a profit making venture. Some believe the higher education sector should advocate for the preservation of the Internet as a commons of society.[5] Indeed, a Statistics Canada study indicates that in 2005, just over 25% of Canadians over 18 used the Internet for purposes of education, training or school work.[6] "As Internet connectivity takes on the characteristics of an essential service – like hydro, water, education and health care – the more important citizens ' unencumbered access to it becomes. As former U.S. Vice-President, Al Gore has recently argued: „Freedom of commu-nications is an essential prerequisite for […] our democracy." "[2]

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