

Maintain the Web's Youthful Idealism

David Gelernter

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The F.C.C. is soliciting public comment on proposed rules that endorse net neutrality on paper although limiting it in practice. The action is troubling – not because of what the proposal says but because it exists. Congress, not bureaucrats, should decide crucial policy questions like this. The Law of the Net is a modern Law of the Sea. Debating such issues and making such laws is the reason we have a Congress.

The underlying technical questions are everyone's business. Net neutrality is a wonderful idea that will die before long, like youthful idealism; but we should keep it (and youthful idealism) alive as long as possible. Cyberspace is still new. We must keep our Internet options open, so that new outfits with new ideas can leaf out and bloom, and run today's dinosaursian Googles and telecoms off the road and into a ditch as soon as possible.

Net neutrality requires internet service providers (I.S.P.'s) to ban all mail but first-class. Many I.S.P.'s want to offer express mail to fancy customers, while saying that ordinary first-class will remain unaffected. Which is ridiculous.

If fancy service is available, then smaller, newer, riskier, more exciting companies won't be able to afford it. Their new ideas will have one more obstacle to jump before they can even get started. When fragile new companies pump bytes onto the Internet (delivering entertainment, information or making sales), their bytes will have to stand aside, cool their heels and probably tip their caps while posh bytes sent by the big boys gallop past. A new company's products and services – its website's responses to input and requests – will inevitably be slower and less regular in arriving.

Soviet Moscow used to have one extra lane right down the center of each major street, reserved exclusively for the state limos of party bigs (as Putin no doubt remembers with tears of nostalgia). Soviet Moscow is the Internet without net neutrality.

Soon the Internet will be transformed as companies pre-position data in your computer. For now, let net democracy continue.

Years ago, in a book named "Mirror Worlds," I called the cybersphere and the not-yet-born Web "the new public square." Net neutrality means that, in this new public square, every digital organization gets a fair chance to be heard. No one gets passed over by a moderator who has been bribed by the rich guys in front.

In the long run, it won't matter. I.S.P.'s get data from long-range data shippers and deliver it to your home. But Internet companies have been tending for years to open local data centers all over the landscape, to shorten delivery routes. Eventually these local data centers will live inside your own computers, where all sorts of stuff will be

pre-positioned, and updated constantly, just in case you should want it. (There are plenty of good ways to guess beforehand what you will want.)

I.S.P.'s will change radically. Furthermore, free markets have proved repeatedly that they are the best way to allocate things people want. The free market will defeat net neutrality even before the inevitable big changes to the cybersphere.

But what's good for adults needn't hold for toddlers. For the time being, American policy should be like that of the nonpartisan British-style speaker of the house, who is brutally fair and lets everyone speak, even the littlest, who might grow up to prime ministers one day.

That's how we should run the Internet today: wide open; and let the best (not the best-backed) ideas win.

David Gelernter is a professor of computer science at Yale University and the author of many books on technology and other topics. His paintings are in the permanent collections of the Tikvah Foundation and the Yeshiva University Museum.

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