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## Net neutrality under public debate

The FCC asks for public input in a new series of proposed regulations.

By **Jerimiah Oetting** November 05, 2009 (3 years ago)

As the Internet has developed into a powerful tool of communication, its regulation and accessibility has become a subject of fierce debate.

A recently proposed set of regulations from the Federal Communications Commission is awaiting finalization, pending a 60-day public discussion in which the details of the draft are decided.

On Oct. 22, the FCC designed a series of regulations to enforce “net neutrality,” the term adopted to describe an accessible and open Internet.

The draft proposes six regulations, including four principals published in 2005 that govern the Internet’s accessibility. The two additional regulations aim specifically to prevent service providers from providing preferential service to desirable customers, as well as ensuring transparency of network management.

School of Mathematics professor Andrew Odlyzko has published a number of papers on the topic of Internet neutrality, and believes the steps taken by the FCC are in the right direction, but aren’t going to end the debate on Internet regulation.

“We’re going to have a mess,” Odlyzko said, stating that Internet regulation will be “providing a lifetime of employment to lawyers and economists.”

The debate over neutrality is based on a spectrum, he said. On one end is the complete privatization of the Internet and on the other is complete government regulation. The current debate is finding a spot somewhere in the middle.

“In principal, my personal preference is towards net neutrality,” he said.

Still, there are others who believe this middle ground is too regulated. Carlson School of Management Professor Alok Gupta believes the current proposed increase in regulation will only inhibit innovation.

“There is no real incentive for investment on the ISP side,” Gupta said.

Gupta believes that allowing Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to charge differential rates based on service will allow for the creation of new technology.

“The proposed rules will either stifle innovation or spawn private networks,” he said.

According to Gupta, bandwidth can be divided into two parts: high data applications and normal Web applications. If the ratio between the two is kept consistent, as it would be under the current proposal, there is no way to invent new applications that utilize an increased amount of bandwidth. Innovators would be forced to create private networks outside of the

Internet that were free of regulation.

However, Gupta admits the Internet can't be completely free of regulation.

"The proponents of net neutrality have a point," he said. "There needs to be intelligent regulation, where ISPs are allowed to provide differential pricing."

With the current discussion of the proposal remaining limited to details of its regulations, it is unlikely that it will undergo any fundamental changes until the proposal is finalized, when it will most likely face congressional challenges.

Minnesota Sen. Al Franken recently made his position on net neutrality known in a speech at Georgetown University on Oct. 5.

"The Internet is a platform for speech, debate, and creativity and it is neutral," Franken said.

"The government has to play a role in ensuring that it stays that way."

Odlyzko said while neutrality is currently a hot topic of discussion, its debate is "too narrow."

"Even if we come to a happy agreement that everyone buys into, there are many other things that need to be discussed," he said.

Issues like who connects to the Internet, and how massive companies like Google use information they own about their users, will be future topics of discussion, Odlyzko said.

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