

AAll Survey: Readers Voice Their Opinion on Net Neutrality

Sometime this month the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) will vote on net neutrality, with all indications pointing toward a rolling back of current policies. While a lot has been written following this announcement, there is still a general misunderstanding, I feel, about what exactly net neutrality is.

According to Wikipedia:

“Net is the principle that internet service providers must treat all data on the internet the same, and not discriminate or charge differently by user, content, website, platform, application, type of attached equipment or method of communication.”

Wikipedia adds that the term was coined by Columbia University media law professor Tim Wu in 2003, as an extension of the longstanding concept of a common carrier, which was used to describe the role of telephone systems.

Under these principles, for example, internet service providers (ISPs) are unable to intentionally block, slow down or charge money for specific websites and online content.

Here are some cited examples of violations of the principles of net neutrality:

- Internet service provider Comcast’s secret slowing (“throttling”) of uploads from peer-to-peer file sharing (P2P) applications by using forged packets. Comcast did not stop blocking these protocols, like BitTorrent, until the FCC ordered them to stop.
- The Madison River Communications company was fined US\$15,000 by the FCC, in 2004, for restricting their customers’ access to Vonage, which was rivaling their own services.
- AT&T was also caught limiting access to FaceTime, so only those users who paid for AT&T’s new shared data plans could access the application.
- From 2011–2013, AT&T, Sprint and Verizon blocked Google Wallet, a mobile-payment system that competed with a similar service called Isis, which all three companies had a stake in developing.
- In 2012, the FCC caught Verizon Wireless blocking people from using tethering applications on their phones. Verizon had asked Google to remove 11 free tethering applications from the Android marketplace. These applications allowed users to circumvent Verizon’s \$20 tethering fee and turn their smartphones into Wi-Fi hotspots. By blocking those applications, Verizon violated a Net Neutrality pledge it made to the FCC as a condition of the 2008 airwaves auction.

- In 2012, AT&T announced that it would disable the FaceTime video-calling app on its customers' iPhones unless they subscribed to a more expensive text-and-voice plan.
- During oral arguments in *Verizon v. FCC* in 2013, judges asked whether the phone company would favor some preferred services, content or sites over others if the court overruled the agency's existing open internet rules. Verizon counsel Helgi Walker had this to say: "I'm authorized to state from my client today that but for these rules we would be exploring those types of arrangements."
- In July 2017, Verizon Wireless was accused of throttling after users noticed that videos played on Netflix and YouTube were slower than usual, though Verizon commented that it was conducting "network testing" and that net neutrality rules permit "reasonable network management practices."

According to FCC chairman, Ajit Pai, a former lawyer at Verizon:

"Under my proposal, the federal government will stop micromanaging the internet. Instead, the FCC would simply require internet service providers to be transparent about their practices so that consumers can buy the service plan that's best for them and entrepreneurs and other small businesses can have the technical information they need to innovate."

The proposal will reverse the Title II classification of internet providers, which allows the agency to put strict limits on their behavior, and replace it with the old "information service" classification, which a federal court has ruled is less comprehensive.

The main argument for those opposing the rollback of net neutrality rules is that, in the absence of any rules, violations of the open internet will become more and more common. In addition, a common argument is that the warnings opponents of the rollback are about what ISPs "might do," not what they've actually done, or would have any business justification for doing.

AAll Weekly Survey Question

I was curious to see what our readers feel about net neutrality and the arguments being made by both sides of the debate. So last week's survey question asked:

Do you think the concerns over the possible rollback of net neutrality are valid?

Here are the results:

Do you think the concerns over the possible rollback of net neutrality are valid?



The majority of the 1,797 responses (52%) say that not enough concerns have been raised about the potential rollback of net neutrality.

Tied for a distant second at 13% are those who are not sure whether we should be concerned about a rollback of net neutrality and those who feel the concerns about the impact of the rollback of net neutrality are overblown.

Another 12% of our readers believe the concerns about the rollback of net neutrality are baseless while the final 10% feel that a sufficient amount of concern is being voiced about the potential rollback of net neutrality.

Weekly Special Question

Since there is so much debate about net neutrality, and confusion, last week's special question asked:

What do you think of when you hear the term "net neutrality"?

In all, we received 297 responses.

The largest grouping of responses (18.1%) sees net neutrality as ensuring unfettered access to the Internet or unfiltered access to content without having to pay additional fees or premiums to access certain services or content.

The second-largest group of responses (nearly 13%) sees net neutrality as meaning government control over the internet.

Slightly more than 8% of responses indicate that net neutrality as merely a political issue either intended to distract consumers or to benefit corporations.

Then, nearly 8% of responses to the weekly special question view net neutrality as meaning internet freedom or a lack of censorship.

Here is a sampling of the responses:

- “[Net neutrality] means access to the capacity of broadband without paying additional fees based on what you’re using it for/who you are paying, etc.”
- “[Net neutrality means] freedom.”
- “It sounds good. But it really means federal government regulation of the internet which will be very bad!”
- “Keeping everyone on a level playing field—not allowing some companies to get preferential bandwidth and others throttled.”
- “Net neutrality = internet access and availability of all web pages without a web page sponsor or supporter paying more for a more prominent position of access or for suppression of other web pages which might be competition.”
- “Net neutrality is important because we need to be encouraging interaction amongst our citizens rather than restricting it. We need to be building a society that encourages all people to reach their full potential. A free internet allows all people to share the capabilities of the internet. Society receives the advantage of hearing the ideas of all people.”
- “[Net neutrality] is a policy that forces cable companies to treat all who distribute through the internet the same way. Cable companies would rather prefer to charge whatever they want to whomever they want which would make it more expensive for some companies to offer content through the internet.”
- “More needless and harmful government intervention in the free market.”
- “I think political corruption. Net neutrality is a simple a way for the government to apply its heavy hand to free speech on the net. To the benefit of the wealthy donor class.”

Everybody has an opinion! Why not give us yours? Participate in our weekly member poll, updated every Monday, and see the results online at www.aaii.com/memberquestion.