Net neutrality: What it is and why does it matter?

Network neutrality (or "net" neutrality) is the concept of online nondiscrimination. It is the principle that consumers/citizens should be free to get access to—or to provide—the Internet content and services they wish, and that consumer access should not be regulated based on the nature or source of that content or service.

Information providers—which may be Web sites, online services, etc., and who may be affiliated with traditional commercial enterprises but who also may be individual citizens, libraries, schools, or nonprofit entities—should have essentially the same quality of access to distribute their offerings. "Pipe" owners (carriers) should not be allowed to charge some information providers more money for the same pipes, or establish exclusive deals that relegate everyone else (including small noncommercial or startup entities) to an Internet "slow lane." This principle should hold true even when a broadband provider is providing Internet carriage to a competitor.

Why is net neutrality an issue?

Net neutrality was a founding principle of the Internet. It is a principle incorporating both the "common carrier" laws that have long governed the phone lines used for both voice telephony and dial-up access. Now, many consumers receive broadband service over other technologies (cable, DSL) that are not subject to the same common-carriage requirements. While these technologies are unquestionably superior to dial-up, the lack of enforceable net neutrality principles concerns us. Cable and DSL companies are planning to engage in "bit discrimination" by providing faster connections to Web sites and services that pay a premium, or by preferring their own business partners when delivering content. As the Internet moves forward, is it really wise to leave net neutrality behind?

What does this mean for academic libraries?

Academic libraries are both providers of Internet content and producers of Internet content, and net neutrality impacts each of these roles differently. For example, many academic libraries use applications like video conferencing to provide distance learning. If net neutrality isn't enforced through legislation, service providers could give priority to some video conferencing providers over others. In other words, the library's choice of a particular video conferencing software package could relegate its content to the slow lane for some end users, whose ISPs may give priority to another video conferencing software package. This could mean that some students' ability to take advantage of distance learning could be compromised.

Further, many research libraries have become information producers themselves. Institutions across the country are making research results, historical databases, interactive experiences, and more available through the Web. These sites are dependable sources of quality, noncommercial information on an Internet that is crowded with questionable sources. But it is unreasonable to think that these libraries would be able to pay an additional premium (besides what they already pay for hosting and bandwidth) to ensure that users can access their sites quickly. Sites created by libraries and other nonprofit institutions would quickly lose the competition for "eyes" if they were forced to compete with sites produced by companies who can afford to cut deals with ISPs for premium service.

For more information on net neutrality, please visit ALA's Network Neutrality page at www.ala.org/ala/washoff/WOissues/techinttele/networkneutrality/netneutrality.htm. It features information on the subject and links to excellent resources like SavetheInternet.com and PublicKnowledge.org.

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