

Network neutrality (or “net” neutrality) is a telecommunications issue to which the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), Congress, and even the executive branch, attempt to stake a claim. So it is no surprise that despite a lot of talk and a little action, no resolution is in sight.

As a strong proponent of net neutrality, ALA is involved in this issue on two fronts—at FCC and on the Hill lobbying Congress, as both arenas have the potential to shape the outcome of net neutrality policies.

The million-dollar question: What is net neutrality?

Simply put, net neutrality is the concept of online nondiscrimination. It is the principle that consumers/general public should be free to get access to—or to provide—the Internet content and services they wish, and that access should not be regulated based on the nature or source of the 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 (Internet service providers or ISPs) should not be allowed to charge some individuals more money for the same pipes, or establish exclusive deals that relegate everyone else to an Internet “slow lane.” This principle should hold true even when an ISP is providing Internet service to a competitor. Without net neutrality, entertainment content could be routed on the “fast lane,” while education content could be directed to the slow lane—all unbeknownst to the users.

### Recent federal action

In October, ALA seized an opportunity to once again engage in FCC’s work on net neutrality. ALA, along with the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) and EDUCAUSE, filed comments (available at [www.wo.ala.org/districtdispatch/?p=5363](http://www.wo.ala.org/districtdispatch/?p=5363)) to the FCC in response to their request for comments on the following two issues:

1. The relationship between open Internet protections and services that are provided over the same last-mile facilities as broadband Internet access service (commonly called “managed” or “specialized” services), and

2. The application of open Internet rules to mobile wireless Internet access services, which have unique characteristics related to technology, associated application and device markets, and consumer usage.


Our comments underscored our agreement with concerns FCC raised in its public notice surrounding the treatment of “specialized services.” While the library, higher education, and academic and research library communities support the development of innovative technology and private investment in networks, we believe that an overly broad exemption for specialized services may enable commercial ISPs to use such services to undermine the robust application of network neutrality rules, including nondiscrimination and transparency.

At the same time, we suggested that private networks, which are used for internal purposes and do not serve the general public, should remain free of traditional telecommunications regulation.

The comments emphasized that FCC must ensure that any policy approach that encourages investment in specialized services does not inadvertently limit investment in broadband Internet access service.

They also stated that public and school libraries, academic and research libraries, and colleges and universities are developing new advanced mobile applications to enhance access to research and information from wireless devices. ARL, ALA, and EDUCAUSE asked FCC to apply net neutrality to mobile and other wireless services to ensure that the Internet remains open for users of these increasingly popular technologies.

As the net neutrality debate continues at both FCC and in Congress, ALA will continue its work to support the adoption of net neutrality principles while stressing that libraries, librarians, and those we serve rely on a fast, reliable, and open Internet.

For additional information, see the May 2010 *C&RL News* “Washington Hotline.” 

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Jenni Terry is press officer at ALA’s Washington Office, e-mail: [jterry@alawash.org](mailto:jterry@alawash.org)