

Date: May 4, 2014; Section: Business; Page: 13A

Just what is Net neutrality?

The debate is heating up about Net neutrality, specifically whether the Federal Communications Commission will end Net neutrality with its new rules. But what is Net neutrality, and how does it affect you?

Consider what could happen without Net neutrality rules: Your Internet service provider (ISP) could charge a fee to stream music and video at full speed. Some sites, those with deep pockets, could receive preferential treatment from ISPs — Pandora might stream flawlessly, while a small music site like Last.fm might lag.

Net neutrality is about fairness across the Internet

— equal treatment for all. Here's the official definition: the principle that Internet service providers should enable access to all legal content and applications regardless of the source, and without favoring or blocking particular products or websites.

The FCC established Net neutrality rules in 2010. Verizon sued the FCC over these rules — and won. Earlier this year, a federal appeals court decided the FCC did not have the authority to enforce its Net neutrality rules. It said the government can regulate crucial utilities like telephone service and electricity, but the Internet wasn't considered to be one of those utilities under current law.

Without Net neutrality, ISPs would be free to charge more or throttle speeds for data-heavy services such as Netflix streaming.

Most major ISPs issued public statements saying they would not change their policies as a result of the ruling. But things changed.

Comcast customers reported Netflix was suddenly streaming slowly

— some said the service was virtually unusable. Netflix confirmed that delivery speed of its content to Comcast subscribers had declined by more than 25 percent, resulting in frequent interruptions and delays for customers trying to stream television shows and movies. In fact, a reader wrote to me about her suddenly slow Netflix streaming speed. When she reported the problem to Comcast and Netflix, each blamed the other for her poor service.

In February, Netflix struck a deal with Comcast to pay for a so-called fast lane for its content. The Netflix deal marked the first time a content provider paid an ISP for better service. And just about two weeks ago, Netflix signed a similar deal with Verizon.

Will the deals stand? The FCC has prepared a new set of rules that some say will end Net neutrality. But FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler insists he supports Net neutrality, and that he and the commission are still working on the rules. In last week's FCC blog post, Wheeler gave several examples of policies that would not be acceptable:

1. Something that harms consumers is not commercially reasonable. For instance, degrading service in order to create a new "fast lane" would be shut down.
2. Something that harms competition is not commercially reasonable. For instance, degrading overall service so as to force consumers and content companies to a higher-priced tier would be shut down.

Although Netflix agreed to pay for faster service, its CEO, Reed Hastings, is not happy about it. Hastings has been very vocal in his criticism of the ISPs.

"Some big ISPs are extracting a toll because they can," Hastings wrote on his blog. "They effectively control access to millions of consumers and are willing to sacrifice the interests of their own customers to press Netflix and others to pay."

Whether the deals will be acceptable under the new rules remains to be seen. Those who view fastlane service as anything but Net neutral, say it will stifle Internet innovation. For instance, only big companies with their big budgets would be able to afford the payments to ISP providers, leaving startups out in the cold. Further, consumers should expect an increase in their Netflix bills and any other video services that make similar payment arrangements, which would typically be passed on to subscribers.

Wheeler's proposal is scheduled to be released to the public on May 15.

Leslie Meredith has been writing about and reviewing personal technology for the past six years. She has designed and manages several international websites. As a mom of four, value, usefulness and online safety take priority. Have a question? Email Leslie at asklesliemeredith@gmail.com.



**Leslie
Meredith**



Tech Matters
