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COMMENTARY

In Defense of Net Neutrality

It's how I could invent the World Wide Web without permission.



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

By *Tim Berners-Lee*

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As the battle around net neutrality rages again, we need to take stock, and ask ourselves: What is the debate really about, and why should business leaders and entrepreneurs care?

Businesses of all sizes create value, jobs and investment opportunities online. Their innovation and value creation are wholly dependent on access to internet connectivity. Net neutrality is the principle that all content must be treated without discrimination, be it commercial or political. Neutral networks are critical to ensuring fair, open competition in the content market and driving America's growth in the digital era.

Net neutrality allowed me to invent the World Wide Web without having to ask anyone for permission or pay a fee to ensure that people could use my idea. Now imagine what would happen if internet service providers—usually a handful of big cable companies that control the connectivity market—were allowed to violate net neutrality. Their gatekeeping powers could be used to require businesses and individuals to pay a premium to ensure their content is delivered on equal terms—or even at all. This would create barriers that disadvantage small businesses and startups across all sectors that rely on the internet in any way.

In the early days of the web, ISPs saw demand for their services surge as people encountered content like never before. As more people got connected, they created more content. A virtuous circle of growth and innovation ensued. You could always access any website over any connection. The technology of the underlying internet advanced dramatically from phone modems to fiber, with speeds available in a home connection growing by a factor of a million. Connectivity and content saw an explosion in growth as separate markets.

But a power struggle emerged as both markets evolved and incentives for ISPs to abuse their abilities to increase profit margins became stronger. Court battles followed, and enforceable net-neutrality rules became a necessity. In 2015 the Federal Communications Commission responded by classifying internet access as a Title II

service. That establishes broadband as a vital utility, giving the FCC the requisite authority to enforce net neutrality.

Today, with billions of dollars at stake in the competition for views, sales and clicks, the incentives for ISPs to violate net neutrality for profit have never been greater. Yet the FCC is now proposing to roll back the rules that were put in place to neutralize those perverse incentives.

Do we want a web where cable companies determine winners and losers online? Where they decide which opinions we read, which creative ideas succeed? That's not the web I want. To judge by support in opinion polls for upholding net neutrality, it's not the web you want either.

The future of innovation, freedom of speech and democracy in America depend on strong, and enforceable net neutrality rules. So the question is: Will we fight hard for the web we want?

The last time this war was waged, more than a million people submitted comments to the FCC. On July 12, the Day of Action for Net Neutrality, 90 businesses and organizations will join forces to protect the open internet. Participating companies will display alerts on their home pages simulating "blocked" messages that users would receive regularly in a world without net neutrality. These homepage alerts will give users the option to send a message to Congress and the FCC before clicking out. Join us in sending a message.

Mr. Berners-Lee is inventor of the World Wide Web and founding director of the World Wide Web Foundation.

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