

What Is Net Neutrality?

Net Neutrality is the guiding principle that preserves our freedom to communicate on the Internet. Net Neutrality protects the open and nondiscriminatory Internet, guaranteeing a level playing field for all websites and Internet technologies. This openness is the reason the Internet has become a powerful engine for free speech, economic innovation and democratic participation in the 21st century.

Net Neutrality promotes free speech and equality on the Internet.

An open Internet offers all Americans the opportunity to speak for themselves without having to convince large media companies that their voices are worthy of being heard. The Internet also helps people find jobs, get an education, connect to friends and family around the world, get news, access government services, and advocate for social change. Net Neutrality ensures that everyone has the same opportunity to find their voice online.

Net Neutrality ensures that diversity of opinion and content flourishes online, preventing the kind of consolidation that has taken place in radio and television. The Internet provides people with the lowest barrier of entry to establishing an online media presence.

Net Neutrality prevents big companies from picking winners and losers online.

Phone and cable giants like AT&T and Comcast want to undercut competition online, favor their own content and services, and have the ability to discriminate against others. The top executives of nearly every major phone and cable company have told the press and their shareholders that they plan to block or degrade the content and services of their competitors. And they've been caught doing it: In 2007, Comcast blocked lawful file-sharing applications that competed with its video business until the FCC stepped in and forced the company to stop.

Net Neutrality and the digital divide

Some claim that passing a Net Neutrality rule will widen the digital divide. Such arguments rest on the false assumption that Net Neutrality will deter investment by the big phone and cable companies in communities of color and rural and other underserved areas. This is simply untrue. No one should believe that if phone and cable companies were allowed to discriminate, they would reverse their decades-long practice of failing to serve or ignoring the needs of diverse communities. If phone and cable companies wanted to invest in closing the digital divide, they would already have done so.

The main reason broadband costs too much and is out of reach for many Americans is because there's not enough competition and consumer choice — not because of Net Neutrality. Permitting discrimination by abandoning Net Neutrality won't lower prices, but it will mean fewer options and limited access for consumers and diminish the number of diverse and independent voices online.

What's happening in Washington?

In 2009, President Obama appointed Julius Genachowski as chairman of the Federal Communications Commission. Upon taking office, Genachowski pledged that protecting the open Internet would be his top priority at the FCC. In October 2009, the agency launched a proceeding to craft a Net Neutrality rule. This move had the support of President Obama, the leaders of the House and Senate and a majority of commissioners at the FCC. But the proceeding was stalled by an April 2010 federal appeals court decision that called into question the agency's authority to regulate the phone and cable companies that provide broadband access for more than 96 percent of the country.

Why must the FCC reclassify broadband services?

The recent federal appeals court decision left the FCC without authority to protect an open Internet and to guarantee broadband access for everyone. The FCC lost this authority by its own doing, when under the Bush administration it decided to classify cable and then phone-based Internet services as Title I "information services" under the Communications Act, over which the FCC has limited power. This Bush-era reclassification was the result of intense lobbying by phone and cable companies. Title II authority is much broader and would give the FCC clear power to protect against the types of Net Neutrality abuses and content discrimination we've seen from Comcast and others. Under the current legal framework, the FCC is powerless to stop companies like AT&T, Comcast, Verizon and Time Warner Cable from prioritizing certain websites, blocking or slowing others, or interfering with any content that travels across their "last-mile" connections into homes.

What can my member of Congress do?

The path to abuse of our Internet freedom has now been cleared. Phone and cable company executives have openly discussed plans to prioritize certain websites and services over others. This would upend the level playing field that has made the Internet such a powerful engine for free speech, economic opportunity and civic participation. The FCC has the legal authority to re-assert its power and stop the phone and cable companies from dismantling the open Internet. Two million Americans have called on Washington to make Net Neutrality the rule of the road. Congress should support the FCC's efforts to reclassify broadband and take back the power to protect American consumers.

Urge your member of Congress to publicly show his or her support for FCC efforts to restore Title II and make Net Neutrality the rule of the road.