

Get off the fence on net neutrality

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Since I last wrote about [Net Neutrality](#) [1], things have gone from unsettling to downright precarious. On August 9, when many Americans were on vacation, Verizon and Google announced “A joint policy proposal for an open internet,” which was breathtaking in its brazenness and frightening in scope.

While saying all the politically correct things about the FCC’s wireline broadband openness principles, the proposal saves it’s a-bomb for wireless broadband. “In recognition of the still-nascent nature of the wireless broadband marketplace, under this proposal we would not now apply most of the wireline principles to wireless.”

As the emergence of smartphones, iPads and wireless USB modems has shown, the wireline Internet will soon be in our rearview mirror on the information superhighway. So, conveniently, an open internet won’t apply to wireless. The future of networking is indeed wireless, and clearly Verizon and Google are eyeing their piece of the pie: “Our proposal would allow broadband providers to offer additional, differentiated online services, in addition to the Internet access and video services (such as Verizon’s FIOS TV) offered today. This means that broadband providers can work with other players to develop new services.”

In other words, expect “premium” content offered by the big boys on the big boys’ network – the one that’s unregulated. Meanwhile, the legacy, regulated, wireline version of the Internet will just plod along as a footnote to free ideas and innovation. This proposal is to be expected from a company where “Rule the Airwaves” is the drumbeat. But for Google, which gained its mighty stature via an open Internet, the “Don’t Be Evil” unofficial mission rings hollow and smacks of hypocrisy.

Perhaps this overreach got the attention of the FCC, as one commissioner, Michael J. Copps, issued a statement that same day: “It is time to move a decision forward — a decision to reassert F.C.C. authority over broadband telecommunications, to guarantee an open Internet now and forever, and to put the interests of consumers in front of the interests of giant corporations.” It must be successful in reclassifying

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broadband as a Title II common carrier service. Barring that, Net Neutrality will be a severely uphill battle -- everyone who cares about an open Internet must get the attention of their Congressional representatives. And at least one U.S. Senator knows an open Internet is important to defend, calling Net Neutrality "the First Amendment issue of our time."

But I would be remiss if I didn't save some criticism for the Executive Branch. The President of the United States, after pledging he would "take a backseat to no one in my commitment to Net Neutrality" (November 14, 2007), has been dead silent on this in recent weeks. Net Neutrality is one issue that does not call for silence, compromise or capitulation to corporate interests. The President must use his bully pulpit to stump for an open Internet and insist the FCC and Congress do the right thing with the same boldness as he exhibited on the campaign trail.

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