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# Don't let ISPs choke internet

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With the internet now folded into our everyday lives, most of us take for granted matters such as open and equal access to online content. That's thanks in part to a 2015 Federal Communications Commission decision to regulate broadband service as a public utility, thereby safeguarding network neutrality.

But the internet's role as a forum for free speech and uniform treatment of all consumers could soon fade if a Trump administration- endorsed plan, proposed by the FCC's chairman, Ajit Pai, succeeds in dismantling net neutrality. That could clear the way for internet service providers, or ISPs, to charge users more to see certain content and restrict access to some websites, among other concerning possibilities.

Pai has maintained that in lieu of what he calls federal government "micromanaging" of the internet, ISPs should be required only to be "transparent about their practices so that consumers can buy the service plan that's best for them." But that sort of self-regulation could allow a company to practice all sorts of shoddy behavior so long as it's disclosed to users.

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If the repeal plan — slated for a vote in mid-December, with the commission's Republican majority currently set to support it — is approved, big telecom companies, such as AT&T, Comcast and Verizon, will be the winners. As U.S. Sen. Brian Schatz has rightly warned, scrapping net neutrality protections means “handing over full control of the internet to providers, leaving the American people with fewer choices and less access.”

Schatz has called for elevating the issue to an election ballot. And last week, U.S. Rep. Tulsi Gabbard also spoke out against the FCC proposal, urging everyone who relies on the internet to “level the playing field of opportunity” to sign a petition opposing it. Their sounding of consumer and First Amendment alarms is not an overreaction, as a repeal could indeed change the internet as we know it.

The debate also pits ISPs — arguing that existing rules prevent them from offering customers a wider selection of services at various prices — against the online likes of Google and Amazon, concerned by the potential for ISPs to become insufficiently checked gatekeepers of online content.

It's true that for decades before the FCC imposed utility status, the internet thrived in a spirit of openness while simultaneously taking shape as a powerful engine for economic growth. But in recent years, emerging technologies put the future of net neutrality in question.

That prompted the FCC, two years ago, to switch classification of high-speed service from “information service” to a telecommunications service, under Title II of the Telecommunications Act. Rooted in phone company rules, Title II classification treats service as a public utility.

New technologies make it possible for ISPs to analyze and manipulate any information we send or receive online. Also, it's possible to tinker with data flow, slowing down or blocking traffic as well as speeding it up. The FCC imposed the Title II regulation, in part, to block those sorts of practices.

That's why when we send or receive data online, we can still expect ISPs to simply transfer it from one end of the network to the other — without strings attached.

Repeal opponents point out that an expectation of marketplace competition deterring slippery practices doesn't pencil out for a few reasons: data manipulation can be difficult to track; and the startup cost for an aspiring ISP is in the daunting billion-dollar range. So, it appears that by lifting Title II regulation, the stage is set for playing favorites.

Supporters counter that the more substantial threat is continued government interference, which they claim has slowed business growth. They assert that we'll all

actually benefit from a return to a "light touch" regulation fueled by private investment and innovation.

Don't count on it.

In the absence of public relations spin, the losers apparent in the aftermath of the proposed repeal would be internet users stuck dealing with monopoly services. And, of course, anyone and everyone concerned about dangers tied to stifling the messy but inherently American flow of unfiltered free speech.

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