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Editorial | Island Voices

Internet without net neutrality should make everyone nervous

By U.S. Sen. Brian Schatz

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"An internet without net neutrality should make everyone who uses the internet nervous, whether you use it to stream your favorite TV shows, research a topic for school, track your health, or keep in touch with family," writes U.S. Sen. Brian Schatz.

When is the last time you thought about your internet service provider?

Unless you have a billing problem or the wi-fi connection is acting funny, it is easy to forget about the phone or cable company that gives you access to the internet.

But now is an important moment to pay attention.

Every time you log on to check e-mail or a banking statement, to find the latest homework assignment, or to access a government service, your internet company plays by an important set of rules, known as net neutrality. These rules ban internet service providers from blocking or slowing down certain kinds of content, or from charging companies to get special treatment on their networks.

Put simply, net neutrality makes access to all content equal. It keeps you, the consumer, in control of what you access online — and it is now under threat.

Under this administration, the government agency responsible for enforcing these rules — the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) — is trying to end net neutrality.

Without net neutrality, internet service providers would be able to alter the internet to be more like cable TV, creating different packages of services based on how much consumers pay. A basic package, for example, would stream videos much slower than a package that costs more.

Your internet company could also create “fast lanes” for content that makes them money, while leaving everything else in a “slow” lane. Companies that pay the toll for the faster lanes would likely pass those costs on to consumers.

Consumers could even be blocked from certain content deemed by an internet service provider as too controversial. People could be blocked from accessing a website that helps them get involved with a union or an app that allows them to donate to a cause.

An internet without net neutrality should make everyone who uses the internet nervous, whether you use it to stream your favorite TV shows, research a topic for school, track your health, or keep in touch with family.

It's also a big concern for Hawaii's economy, especially small businesses. Without net neutrality, big corporations could pay an internet service provider to feature their content exclusively, making it much harder for people to find more local options. Smaller companies, like the many wonderful mom and pop enterprises in Hawaii, will be left behind.

Musicians and photographers who use the internet to reach people around the world could struggle if certain services are blocked. Health care providers who need the internet to communicate with their patients and monitor their health will have limited options. And Realtors who rely on video streaming, mobile apps and other internet services are worried that the end of an open internet will keep people from buying homes — or simply funnel them to big corporations that have the money to pay internet service providers.

There is too much at stake to do nothing. Political engagement, access to learning and entertainment, or just the next visitor to Hawaii — all rests on a foundation of free and open access to the internet.

Ask yourself. Do you want an internet where these companies can treat you as a second-class citizen, a business where the big dogs eat first?

It will take millions of Americans speaking out on this issue to save net neutrality. Now is the time to think about your internet service provider — and stop this administration from destroying the internet as we know it.

U.S. Sen. Brian Schatz of Hawaii is the ranking member of Senate Commerce Subcommittee on Communications, Technology, Innovation, and the Internet.

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