

Why Net Neutrality matters

By Tabitha Wells

Backed by the U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC), President Donald Trump announced this month plans to roll back Net Neutrality, lifting restrictions on internet service providers (ISPs) that limit how and what they can charge consumers. There's no way around it ? this move is incredibly dangerous, and threatens the way we send and receive news and information, interact, do business ? basically everything that happens on the internet.

This issue goes far beyond Republican vs. Democrat, conservative vs. liberal, as even avid supporters of Trump, such as Breitbart, have vocally spoken out against the move.

The repeal of Net Neutrality in the States would affect us here in Canada, too.

But before we get too far into that, let's break down what can happen if the regulations in place are removed.

One of the regulations in place is that services must be provided at a flat rate and must include access to the entire internet. If repealed, any service provider in the States could not only charge whatever they wanted, they could also block whatever they wanted from their users and extort it at an additional rate.

For example, say an internet provider that owns Bing only wants their users searching on Bing. They could block access to every other search engine, including Google, Yahoo, AOL, and every other engine. They could also decide to block access to Gmail, Yahoo Mail, and even personal email accounts through self-hosted websites. You would only be able to utilize MSN, Hotmail, and Live accounts for free. They could allow you to still access those sites, but for an additional charge.

Likewise, internet companies could extort their customers' use of social media sites by charging an additional package fee for access to Facebook, Twitter, and other social media.

Now, here's where it gets dangerous. Let's say one of these providers is backed by or quietly owned by a prominent member of a government party. It doesn't matter which one ? Republican or Democrat, Liberal or Conservative ? because it could have the same results. They only want their customers reading news that supports their standpoint, so they limit internet access to only news sites that support their narrative.

They can also choose to slow down internet speeds and then force consumers to pay more (even when you're paying for a certain speed, because there's no regulation).

Net neutrality also includes restrictions for the government, something that would no longer exist if this was rolled back.

Essentially, Net Neutrality ensures an open and free internet, whereas total freedom to the ISPs means a closed door internet, where, much like cable TV, everything is restricted and comes at an extra and exorbitant cost. According to Trump-appointee FCC chair Ajit Pai, the only thing that would be asked of ISPs would be to 'voluntarily' agree to maintain open internet.

So how exactly does all of this affect Canada? Although the Liberal government has promised to maintain Net Neutrality and fight for open internet, if the FCC repeal goes through, they could face added pressure from Canadian ISPs, businesses, and even other political groups to do the same.

Of course, that part is a very big if. The bigger concern with the rollback of Net Neutrality is that this move could also affect Canadian companies that do business with the U.S. via the internet, as well as Canadian consumers who purchase from U.S. sites. If sites like Etsy, for example, fall under the extra costs, smaller businesses may be unable to afford the cost of access.

And while all of this is a big 'if' with the restriction of Net Neutrality, it's not a stretch. We've seen how internet, cable, and telecom companies love to extort their customers even here in Canada. They're in the business not to provide access, but rather to make money.

So what exactly can we do about it here? Well, not a whole lot. Although we cannot officially lend our signatures, names, and support in protests and petitions, there is one thing we can do: keep talking about it. The more people are aware, the more we can explain what this means, the more we can help people in the U.S. who may not realize the implications to examine it as well.

The FCC will vote on this in December. If you have friends and relatives in the States, urge them to write their senators and representatives to take a stand and vote against the repeal. Write our representatives and let them know that no matter which way the vote goes in the states, we expect they will continue to take a stand in favour of Net Neutrality in Canada.

In closing, I'm going to shift away from the topic. This will be my final column for the Citizen, at least for the near future. Life has been rocky, as I discussed in my last piece, and I feel it's time for me to step away and focus on my family and sense of direction. Having this opportunity with the paper has been a great honour, but even greater than that has been the response of this community. To all who have supported, applauded, and followed my work this past year, thank you. Although this is an end now, I have hopes it will not be my final curtain call. In the meantime, anyone interested in following my ramblings and thoughts can view them on my

blog at www.tabithawells.com.

In all things, remember to stand for what's right, to listen to those who have differing opinions with an open heart and an open mind, and ultimately, to work together to continue to make our community a great place to live.

Thanks, Orangeville, for putting up with my long-winded, passion-driven pieces. It's been a blast. See you all on the flip-side.