Net neutrality may be a necessity

Net neutrality represents one of a few telecommunications terms that, while very difficult to precisely define, can cause a large amount of conversation on both sides of the issue. For those of us who may have returned from a rather long vacation, net neutrality references the prioritization of network traffic. By itself, the prioritization of network traffic is no big deal as many organizations with large integrated voice and data networks have favored digitized voice, video and other real-time traffic over file transfers and similar applications for quite some time. Where the controversy arises is when a communications carrier begins to prioritize traffic on its internal network that is connected to the Internet. While a communications carrier that constructed a large-scale internal IP network has every right to prioritize different types of traffic flowing over its network, consumers fear that prioritization could morph into a blocking mechanism whereby certain web sites are treated more favorably than others. For example, suppose a communications carrier is offered 2 cents per customer for each page hit originating on their network and directed to a particular web search engine, while other search engines offer half that amount or less.

   Because each large carrier IP network connected to the Internet is capable of generating millions of searches per day, just a few pennies here and a few pennies there will result in serious revenue. To further enhance the revenue stream it is not inconceivable that the communications carrier could favor the search engines that pay the most for hits by placing network traffic with the destination address of that search engine in high-priority queues as traffic flows through the carrier's infrastructure. In effect, users attempting to access competitive search engines would experience delays that could appear to the inexperienced as web search delays instead of network delays. Thus, when a user became tired of waiting for responses from one search engine and switched to the favored search engine, they would achieve a higher level of response time satisfaction as well as unknowingly fatten the wallet of the communications carrier.

The problem with the net neutrality issue, to coin a term from the Fox Network, is one of 'fair and balanced'. While communications carriers develop and operate large IP-based networks and have the right to prioritize certain types of traffic over other types of traffic, this prioritization needs to be done in a fair and balanced manner. That is, nobody can rightly complain when voice applications are given priority over data. However, if the carrier should stray from a fair and balanced agenda to prioritize traffic in return for third-party revenue it would then be crossing a red line that regulators may have to deal with. As my Macon TV announcer would say, 'That's my opinion—what's yours?'

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