

1-4-2018

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Recommended Citation

Romero, A. 2018. The effect of the end of net neutrality. *The Edwardsville Intelligencer* 4 January 2018, p. A3.

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The effect of the end of net neutrality

Dr. Aldemaro

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Letters from Academia

alded as upholding the basic tenets of democracy, and were compared favorably to the strict restrictions placed on the Internet by dozens of undemocratic regimes around the world.

The war against free access has been carried out by politicians mostly to benefit commercial interests. In the past, a number of ISP companies such as Comcast, AT&T, and Madison River Communications, have been fined by the FCC for violating the net neutrality principle for deliberately slowing the upload of certain applications (a process known by the term “throttling”) or restricting costumers’ access to competitors’ sites or to very popular sites such as Netflix or YouTube.

The December 14, 2017 vote by the FCC means that your ISP can now freely decide not only how much they can charge you for general access, but also charge you premiums fees for accessing popular websites and even block access to sites managed by the competition. The end results? Less access and higher costs for the consumer.

Given that scholarly work has had as a premise free and quick access to information, it is not surprising that a number of higher education associations have heavily criticized the FCC decision. In fact, some of them had spoken out against the elimination of the net neutrality principle by submitting

opinions during the four-month public comment period, urging the FCC to keep the regulations in place.

Among those higher education groups opposing the elimination of net neutrality were the National Association of College and University Business Officers and the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities. Jody Feder, director of accountability and regulatory affairs for the latter, said the vote by the commission to scrap net neutrality would affect research, instruction, and communication on every campus, and would have detrimental effects “on students, research, and faculty at America’s private colleges and universities.”

The main factor behind these concerns is the fact that there is a gap between what a small, rural college can afford and the immense resources that many private or large state institutions can spend when it comes to accessing the Internet. Thus, access based on financial resources will widen the socio-economic gap that has been growing among people over the last few decades in this country, and now the haves and have-nots will include colleges and universities.

Now that all access will be unregulated, an ISP can come up with a price tag that will maximize for them what they charge their costumers regardless of the actual cost for delivering access. On top of all that, your ISP can decide what you can access, and use that power to promote their own economic interests. Given the long tradition these companies have of col-

lecting personal information, you can bet that they will figure new ways to target your Internet content based on your personal preferences.

Some colleges and universities will not feel the direct impact of this change in policies immediately because they run on private networks managed by other entities. What deregulations will create right away is an environment of uncertainty.

If we want to find a comparable example of what may happen when moving from a regulated to an unregulated environment, take, for example, what took place in 1978 when the U.S. government removed itself from controlling fares, routes and market entry of new airlines. Although it initially led to an increase in the number of flights, passenger usage and lower fares, today if you want to receive good treatment from the airlines – from leg space to food to checked luggage – you have to pay a premium fee. Further, the market today has fewer airlines, especially for certain airports, and fares remain high despite lower fuel prices.

Although a number of lawsuits have been filed opposing the FCC decision, the sense of freedom and accessibility you enjoy today when accessing the Internet may be a thing of the past in the not-too-distant future.

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You expect that any material in public libraries is available to you. There may be a few exceptions, such as adult material not being accessible to minors, or some very rare or delicate materials that need to be handled with special care and cannot be checked out. Nowadays when you do an Internet search you expect to access any website for the same cost and at the same speed.

There is free access to the Internet at many locations, from public libraries to places such as malls, coffee shops, and the like. The connections at these places are usually not that fast, and you are sometimes forced to provide personal information in exchange for the access. If you want an Internet connection at your home or business you have to pay for it. Your search choices are the same regardless of your Internet Service Provider.

Now all those basic assumptions about equal access to the Internet can be thrown out of the window. Last month the Federal Communications Commission, in a 3-2 vote along party lines, ended the net neutrality policy that has been in place for years. But what does that mean and how it can affect higher education?

Until last year the FCC followed the principle known as net neutrality, which means that all ISPs must treat all data the same without discriminating or charging differently by content, website, and/or user. Therefore, under that principle ISPs could not intentionally block, slow down or charge money for specific websites and online content. These consumer protections were her-