FREE ENTERPRISE

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

My town has one cable company. One or two other options exist for high-speed Internet service – some (but not all) locations support DSL through the phone provider. If you have the money, you can get mobile wireless access or a satellite dish. All these options are built on an enormous infrastructure investment.

Whenever I hear about the net neutrality debate, I feel like it should focus on real situations like my hometown rather than on the superficial tropes that fall so often into our political discourse. Superficiality is a constant companion in politics because it is usually in someone's interest to make difficult questions look easy.

Even from the crag of this highly skeptical viewpoint, I must confess I'm saddened by what is happening with the net neutrality debate. This issue, which started as an arcane matter of regulatory authority, has a huge capacity to transform our entire culture, and it should not be left to the usual role-playing drama of communal fake anger and platitudes – be they the right-wing or the left-wing kind.

I'm hearing all too often that this debate comes down to the *liberals* who favor net neutrality and the *conservatives* who don't. This cozy oversimplification is only one step from the still more erroneous and more widely held viewpoint that the net neutrality movement is a bunch of hippies and socialists, thus "proving" that the anti-net-neutrality position is the rightful home of the business community.

The Heartland Institute, whose mission is to "discover, develop, and promote free-market solutions" (and which seems to have some tie with the so-called Tea Party movement), recently put out a policy guide called the Patriot's Playbook that reportedly states, "A truly free and open Internet is one free of bureaucratic meddling and a top-down net neutrality regime."

The lobbyists take this line in Washington all the time, and they have succeeded in intimidating legislators of both parties, many of whom don't appear to have much of a backbone anchoring that left or right wing.

The bottom line is, after 20 years of dashed hopes and disasters, certain Internet companies have finally found a way to make money, and the access providers want a piece of it. As far as I can tell, there doesn't seem to be any benefit at all to the consumer in letting the providers shake down the Internet companies for a part of their profits. It will probably put some of the marginal web companies out of business and force the survivors to be even more commercial and intrusive in order to break even – and for what?

I have a feeling these lobbyists and tea partiers who feel the free market demands a non-free Internet would answer this argument as follows:

If farmer Bob doesn't like the fact that his favorite websites are suddenly blocked by his cable provider – or that they require an extra HBO-style "premium content" fee when they used to be free with the basic service – farmer Bob can start his own cable company, wire a few hundred thousand of his neighbors with a parallel and redundant cable system, spend a few million on connectivity equipment, and sign some bandwidth deals with wholesale suppliers, thus teaching the original provider a hard lesson in the importance of customer satisfaction.

Because the emphasis is on embodying an identity through a collection of beliefs that reflect a personal "style" (rather than on actually affecting policy in some constructive way), it is not important for anyone to actually believe it is possible for farmer Bob to start his own cable company – it is sufficient merely to testify that the argument exists in a theoretical sense – the rest is in the details.

It is through this delegation of the details that whole movements – and whole sectors of the electorate – can claim to represent the interests of small business when they are actually acting as a botnet for the antithetical interests of big business.

If you really like free enterprise, maybe the place to start is here:

- The barriers of entry for an Internet business are tiny – almost non-existent. Almost anyone with the time and energy can set up a commercial website. Because the overhead is low, the emphasis is on creativity and innovation.

- Almost no one can set up a cable company. A few players control most of the market, and they are consolidating fast. Because the barriers of entry are high, the emphasis is on defending turf and leveraging a position in the supply chain to exact tribute from others who want to do business.

Let's see … which alternative looks more like free enterprise?

Joe

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