

Net Neutrality Advocates Ready for New Congress

Net neutrality advocates on Thursday reiterated their opposition to allowing preferential treatment on the Internet, and a key lawmaker pledged to continue the legislative battle against prioritized web access.

Se. Byron Dorgan, D-N.D., said he plans to seek a hearing before the Commerce Committee with the intention of getting pro-network neutrality legislation to the Senate floor.

The term "net neutrality" refers to the idea that every Web site on the Internet, whether it be a major company's portal or a homemade storefront, has the same right to speed and access. A retail giant like Target might be larger than a two-person online clothing operation, but both companies have the same rights when they're on the web.

Chief executives of some major Internet service providers, however, have voiced support for a system that would allow them to provide quicker download times or site access for those willing to pay for it. While this might benefit companies that can fork over the cash, it could be detrimental to smaller retailers if their page loads much slower than a site from a major corporation.

"The future of the Internet is at stake," Dorgan said during a teleconference sponsored by SavetheInternet.com, an activist Web site supported by media watchdog Free Press.

Dorgan and Republican Olympia Snowe of Maine, both of whom sit on the Senate Commerce Committee, pushed net neutrality last year in an amendment attached to a larger telecommunications bill, but the bill died in committee. Net neutrality was revived to a degree by year's end when the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) approved the merger of AT&T and BellSouth with the requirement that both companies agree to strict net neutrality requirements for at least 24 months. In March, the FCC separately pledged to look into the matter.

Nonetheless, Dorgan introduced another bill in January intended to preserve net neutrality. "The issue has moved from an unknown technology issue to one of the dominant telecom and Internet policy debates in DC," Dorgan said.

Dorgan joined representatives networking site MoveOn.org and the Christian Coalition, among others, who voiced support for net neutrality.

Adam Green, civic communications director for MoveOn.org, said that SavetheInternet.com members have met with 42 House members of late, many of whom are freshman members of Congress, to discuss network neutrality. "I intend to make a solid, grassroots push" for net neutrality to be written into law by year's end, he said.

When questioned about the possibility of actually passing net neutrality legislation this year given the troubles it encountered last year, Ben Scott, policy director for Free Press, acknowledged that the "legislative cycle is naturally a bit delayed" because of the exchange of power from Republicans to Democrats following the 2006 elections. " - But - I expect you will see more - action on net neutrality - in the summer and fall as things begin to heat up on Capitol Hill," Scott said.

Michele Combs, vice president of communications for the Christian Coalition, said her organization is concerned because of its great reliance on the Internet for member communication. The coalition's state

chairmen have their own Web sites and many of the group's church services are now broadcast over the Internet, Combs said.

The Christian Coalition is also worried that ISPs might "control our content," Combs said. The group would not like "having someone tell us what we can and can't send out," she said.

Internet providers basically say that it's their right to manage their systems as they see fit. BellSouth, for example, has said in the past that it supports the "general notion" of net neutrality but also advocates "substantial flexibility in managing their broadband networks and in structuring business arrangements with customers and content providers."

Editor's Note: This story has been updated to clarify that SavetheInternet.com members met with House members, not just Adam Green.

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