

Google-Verizon deal undermines push for an open Internet

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In its joint proposal with Verizon issued Monday August 9, Google has made a significant change in corporate policy in the direction of forestalling any government requirement to maintain “net neutrality,” the open and equal access to the Internet by all web sites and content providers. In particular, the two companies have agreed to seek an exemption from “net neutrality” for providers of wireless Internet services, where Verizon and Google have linked up in a deal to promote Google’s Android platform.

The joint proposal backs net neutrality only for Internet services provided over broadband landlines. It proposes that “a broadband Internet access service provider would be prohibited from preventing users of its broadband Internet access service from (1) sending and receiving lawful content of their choice; (2) running lawful applications and using lawful services of their choice, and (3) connecting their choice of legal devices that do not harm the network or service, facilitate theft of service, or harm other users of the service.”

This addresses fears that broadband companies such as Comcast could use their control of Internet bandwidth to demand payment from Internet companies such as Google, to ensure the most efficient transfer of data to end users.

Concern was heightened in April this year when a US appeals court vacated an order issued by the Federal Communications Commission in August 2008 which required that Comcast disclose details of its network management practices and not interfere with certain types of traffic. The US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia ruled that the FCC could not order Comcast to stop blocking subscribers from using online file-sharing services such as BitTorrent to swap movies and other large files.

But the Google/Verizon document also contains provisions for “additional or differentiated services” that would not be subject to the same controls. In particular, the statement contains a proposal to exempt wireless broadband from any legislation which may be brought forward by Congress. It states: “Because of the unique technical and operational characteristics of wireless networks, and the competitive and still-developing nature of wireless broadband services, only the transparency principle would apply to wireless broadband at this time. The US Government Accountability Office would report to Congress annually on the continued development and robustness of wireless broadband Internet access services.”

It is this exemption of the rapidly growing mobile Internet which has placed Google at odds with net neutrality campaigners, some of whom were shocked at hearing the news. But Google’s position in the net neutrality debate comes as a surprise only if one believes the pronouncements from the search giant’s well-oiled publicity machine that the desire to not be “evil” is the primary concern in Google’s business decisions. In the final analysis, Google’s primary motive, like that of any corporation, is to make money.

Google and Verizon are both key players in the mobile Internet market. A survey by comScore of March this year lists Verizon as the top mobile operator with 31.1 percent of the market in the preceding three months. For its part, Google’s share of the US smartphone market jumped from 2.8 percent in October 2009 to 7.1 percent in January 2010. This makes it the fourth largest behind Blackberry maker RIM with 43 percent, Apple with 25.1 percent and Microsoft with 15.7 percent. Google has overtaken Palm, which lost 2.1 percentage points in the same period, leaving it with 5.7 percent of the US market.

The Google/Verizon agreement has been supported by AT&T, the second most popular mobile services carrier, largely due to its exclusivity tie-in with Apple for sales of the iPhone, with 25.2 percent of the market.

During in the 2008 election campaign, Obama declared himself to be “a strong supporter of net neutrality.” In interviews he added, “what you'd have is you could potentially download and get much better quality from the Fox News site, while you're getting rotten service from some mom-and-pop sites.” Obama added that “Facebook, MySpace, Google might not have been started if you had not had a level playing field for whoever’s got the best idea, and I want to maintain that basic principle in how the Internet functions. As president, I'm going to make sure that that's the principle my FCC commissioners are applying as we move forward,” he concluded.

As with so many other campaign pledges however, the Obama administration has caved in to the demands of big business, and has proven incapable of defending an open Internet.

On the eve of the Google/Verizon announcement, FCC Chief of Staff Edward Lazarus announced the agency had called off a round of “stakeholder discussions” begun after the appeals court ruling on Comcast. “It has been productive on several fronts, but has not generated a robust framework to preserve the openness and freedom of the Internet – one that drives innovation, investment, free speech, and consumer choice,” Lazarus said. “All options remain on the table as we continue to seek broad input on this vital issue.”

Currently the FCC treats broadband as a lightly regulated “information service” and argued that this gave it the authority to mandate net neutrality rules. The FCC has considered a solution that would reclassify broadband Internet service under the Communications Act as a telecommunications service. At first glance such a reclassification appears to make sense. With the growth of VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) services such as Skype and Google Voice, broadband networks are most certainly used for carrier services traditionally covered by the telecommunications industry. But how would such a reclassification ensure a free and open Internet? The FCC already has this authority over the telecom giants but the telecommunications network is hardly open.

One Democratic commissioner on the FCC, Michael

Copps, complained about the direction of the Obama administration’s policy, saying of the Google-Verizon pact, “Some will claim this announcement moves the discussion forward. That’s one of its many problems. It is time to move a decision forward -- a decision to reassert FCC authority over broadband telecommunications, to guarantee an open Internet now and forever, and to put the interests of consumers in front of the interests of giant corporations.”

The reality is that free and open access to the Internet is incompatible with a society dominated by giant corporations in which all resources are seen as only a means to corporate profits. The Internet today plays an indispensable role in the lives of masses of people. It can not be left to the mercy of the corporations or their representatives in Washington.



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