

Jayanthi Rangarajan says users want freedom of movement, not a tiered Internet

The debate about Internet neutrality has continued to gather speed in recent months, focusing on concerns that the Internet is in danger of being split into tiers. Network providers want to charge premiums for the delivery of certain content, while traditional content providers, such as Google, AOL and MSN, which have profited from the web, are trying to retain control. Meanwhile, the mobile industry is trying to establish new domains and standards for mobile Internet content. But will consumers accept such changes? Where does the power really lie?

The net-neutrality battle saw the U.S. Senate vote recently in favor of enabling operators and network owners to offer priority services on their networks, essentially creating a first- and second-class-stamp system for the Internet. Despite extensive lobbying from industry heavyweights, including Amazon, Google and Microsoft, Internet-service providers might be able to charge to prioritize some Internet services, such as voice or video, over their network.

Such a move could tilt the Internet's level playing field and interfere with consumers' freedom. Unlike the choice consumers have to select any web content at the same price and quality of service, the tiered system could favor larger content providers, which could afford priority tolls and taxes.

Mobility tier

Some initiatives launched last year, such as mobile domain .mobi, which succeeds WAP as a standard for "made for mobile" web sites, further threaten the neutrality of the Internet. Although "bite-sized" web sites would represent an advance in mobile usability, they might be difficult to achieve. Only a limited number of sites would be available on mobile, and the standard might confuse users, who would have to know whether to use .com or .mobi.

In another attempt to make a tiered Internet, content providers are offering specific-purpose applications, separate from their "full" web sites. The individual services include functions such as e-mail, weather forecasts, driving maps and sports scores, including MapQuest Mobile, Google Maps, ESPN BottomLine, Yahoo Go and AccuWeather. Many such services are funded by advertising, but it is unclear whether they will con-

tinue to prosper. Will mobile subscribers really load up their handsets with downloads and applications that are different from the Internet services they have come to rely on?

When the mobile Internet debuted, operators tended to adopt a walled-garden approach, using WAP, I-mode and other systems of mobile-web-site programming to give access only to the limited list of sites that they thought would work well over mobile. The strategy was driven by the belief that people could cope with only a miniature Internet on their phones.

Freedom of choice on mobile started to take hold last year, and some operators in Europe report that far more data revenue comes from off-portal than on-portal access. Consumers are showing that they do not want to pay a €4 (US\$5.20) premium for second-tier Internet content when they can access the first-tier source directly from their mobile.

Operators are increasingly aware that it's important to harness the Internet in its entirety to realize its potential on mobile.

The mobile Internet must avoid becoming further fragmented from the PC Internet world, which will undoubtedly happen if tiered approaches continue to be developed. The end-user experience should be as free and as close to the fixed Internet as possible, with the addition of mobile innovations.

Novarra's recent findings show that Internet user habits on mobile are similar to those on PC. Significant data traffic is being generated on both 2.5G and 3G networks by mobile users, who view an average of 390 pages a month, amounting to a three-fold increase in data consumption in the first year of use.

The convergence or divergence of the mobile Internet is a subject that will be hotly debated in the next few years. Regardless of standards and initiatives, consumers will decide what wins. They have shown us that openness is the key to the mass-market take-up of the mobile Internet. Customers will be satisfied only when they can access all Internet content from mobile devices, regardless of its size or apparent importance. MM

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