

THE IMPORTANCE OF NET NEUTRALITY IN THE EMERGING AND DEVELOPING WORLD

Summary

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NEW REPORT FINDS AN END TO NET NEUTRALITY WILL LEAD TO INCREASED GLOBAL POVERTY

As countries continue to debate whether to enshrine into law or revoke the principles of net neutrality – which is the idea that all web traffic should be treated equally by service providers, regardless of where it originated or what type of data it is – a new report released by digital rights group Access (www.AccessNow.org) entitled *The Importance of Net Neutrality in the Emerging and Developing World*, argues that revoking the principles of net neutrality will have a negative economic impact on developing economies.

THE FUTURE IS (INDEED) WIRELESS

Developments in new technologies and business models are enabling networks to reach more people at lower costs. As 3G mobile is increasingly rolled out in developing countries, wireless access via mobile phones will be crucial for the many people in these countries without computers and/or fixed broadband. Increasingly, mobile phones are being used in creative ways to increase productivity in fields such as agriculture, banking, and health. As wireless access is drastically more prevalent than landline connections, it is key that these networks remain neutral. Tiered payment would put these countries at a severe disadvantage as access becomes increasingly essential for carrying out important day to day activities which are critical in the digital age for development to take place, and to date, have played a significant role in reducing poverty and promoting economic prosperity.

REVERSING NET NEUTRALITY WILL HINDER THE DEVELOPMENT OF IMPOVERISHED COUNTRIES

Revoking the principles of net neutrality will hurt the economic development of impoverished countries by increasing antitrust practices among technology companies, a trend which will be exacerbated in developing countries where regulation is already not adequate or enforced. These ISPs already frequently prevent users from using newer and more cost effective technologies in order to protect their traditional telecommunications businesses, such as VOIP services like Skype. Such monopolies would increase the power of the few ISPs operating in developing countries. It will also hurt small and micro business owners, who won't be able to pay for the same top-tier internet access which their already richer competitors in the developed world will be able to afford, and thus will be at a disadvantage in the global internet market.

NET NEUTRALITY IS KEY TO ENABLING GREATER ACCESS TO HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND SOCIAL PROGRAMS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Without Net neutrality, the cost of online learning would rise, effectively marginalising access to online educational services. Increasingly, developing countries that face shortages of healthcare workers are utilizing mobile technology to promote quality health care. However, health, education, and social programs, will be made more costly and less effective by the loss of Net Neutrality. Programs –which for example increase the number of people getting counseled and tested for HIV/AIDs by 40% – and related types of community services are likely to be de-prioritised, making access more costly and thus out of reach for a vast majority of the population.

AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES ARE INCREASINGLY USING FILTERING MODELS PIONEERED BY THE WEST

Worryingly, the report found that revoking net neutrality in developed countries has negative effects in the developing world, as technologies and legislation developed in the West migrate to undemocratic and unstable countries. For example, Western filtering tools and services, ostensibly developed to block child-pornography and other undesirable or illegal online content, are popular among authoritarian regimes. With a recent report indicating that nine countries in the Middle East and North Africa are currently using filtering software – blocking over 20 million Internet users from accessing politically blacklisted websites – the tools that Western countries use to create a tiered internet are available as well.¹ Additionally, a reversal of Net Neutrality principles in the West can be used to legitimize censorship by autocratic regimes, which will hurt government transparency and the advancement of human rights. The spawning of copycat legislation makes it increasingly easier for oppressive governments to manipulate content and control the internet.

ICT FOR D (THAT IS, DEVELOPMENT)

Broadening internet access in developing countries stimulates employment and increases economic growth. Cities with quality, unfettered Internet access can potentially attract more investment, and communities can thrive if they can communicate with people within and outside their communities about common interests. The role of e-commerce is steadily rising in developed and non-developed countries – a recent study found that the growth of Hong Kong's Internet economy is 7% annually, outpacing the city's GDP growth rate of 4%.² Greater access to government services online also fosters civic empowerment, contributing to the creation and strengthening of robust democracies. Ultimately, findings in the report reveal that net neutrality is key to unlocking the dynamic potential of ICT in the developing world. Policies and regulation that reject net neutrality will stunt economic growth and innovation as well as restrict access to social, health, educational and human rights services, which are increasingly dependent upon reliable, unfettered wireless connections.

Access is a global movement for digital freedom premised on the belief that political participation and the realization of human rights in the 21st century is increasingly dependent on access to the internet and other forms of technology.

For more information, please visit www.accessnow.org or e-mail info@accessnow.org.

- 1 Noman H and York C. J (2010/2011), West Censoring East The Use of Western Technologies by Middle East Censors 2010-2011, Open Net Initiative Bulletin http://opennet.net/sites/opennet.net/files/ONI_WestCensoringEast.pdf p. 1 & 3; Last accessed 10 August 2011.
- 2 <http://blogs.wsj.com/hong-kong/2011/05/05/hong-kong-internet-economy-lags-behind-south-korea-japan/>. Full report can be found here: http://static.googleusercontent.com/external_content/untrusted_dlcp/www.connectedharbour.hk/en/hk/files/the-connected-harbour-may-2011.pdf Last accessed 10 August 2011