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Save the Internet

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Little Red Herrings — SAVE THE INTERNET!

by **Mark Y. Herring** (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herringm@winthrop.edu>

Let me admit, without hesitation, that this is not what you think. There is clickbait on the Internet, which is, of course, well known to anyone who has been online for more than ten minutes. Before that, however, there was the proverbial “man bites dog” headline that sandbagged readers into reading a story that they would not otherwise have read had the headline been more honest.

It’s not that I do not want to save the Internet. I do. Nevertheless, I’m a little concerned that those who carry these placards are not really about saving it, having no salvific bone in their bodies. Rather, they are for eliminating anything that the current presidential administration is in favor of, which isn’t the same thing. Perhaps **Eliot** was right: the greatest treason is to do the right thing for the wrong reason.

With rare exception, nothing has galvanized activists and those of us in libraries more these days than net neutrality. It’s also “a thing” with just about everyone else. If you “google” the phrase, the first two or three trillion hits that come up are in favor of the status quo and against the current **Federal Communications Commission’s** chairman, **Ajit Pai**, and the **FCC’s** plans to scuttle the **Obama**-era rules on net neutrality: no blocking, no throttling, and no paid prioritization. By the time you read this, the 3-2 decision in favor of scuttling the rules may well be overturned. But in case it’s not and the decision stands, here are a few reasons why it may not be Armageddon after all.

The hysteria surrounding this issue — and I will get to that later — is nothing short of astonishing, not to mention embarrassing. Frankly, there is not only no room for another view, but also like **Emily Dickinson’s** poem, if you demur from the status quo you’re straightway handled with a chain, literally.

Still, contrarian that I am, I’m always worried when *everyone* agrees on one view and wants to garrote the opposing view, with blood and all. Why, even the other day, the normally staid and composed **ALA** hyperventilated in tweets and Facebook posts over net neutrality.

I should not be surprised. Apparently, today’s young people, and not-so-young people, take the view that if you disagree with something, you not only do not have to listen to an opposing view, but you can shout it down, holler, throw things, break things, set fire to things, and harass in every way. Whenever I see that sort of thing, I am reminded of **Shakespeare**: I think the lad[ies], and in this case, also the gentlemen, do protest too much.

So, herewith, are points to ponder when you think about net neutrality. Granted, these are only points to ponder about whether a highly regulated net neutrality may well be a bad thing. That’s only because you really have to be determined to find that opposing still small voice crying in the wilderness in favor of the **FCC** plans. It’s a tiny voice that cannot be heard above the din and tintinnabulation telling us that maintaining net neutrality is the

ONLY choice. It may be, too, that some of those voices are being silenced, perhaps even with silencers.

Consider this a think piece in the sense that I’m asking readers to think for moment that net neutrality may not be the only view to hold.

Ditching the current rules puts consumers in charge: Currently, only the large ISPs are in charge, not you, the consumer. They decide what will and what will not fly, and there is little anyone can do about that. Ditching the current rules would allow many more players and diminish the control of the “big boys.” Think what happened with the so-called Baby Bells.

Ditching the current rules places the cost of innovation in capable hands. Right now, you, the taxpayers, fund innovation through the government. Raise your hand if you think government to be especially innovative. Now, under Title II, a slew of regulations is placed before ISPs, and they must submit proposals for any new business model. Once the **FCC** decides against them, there is no recourse. It is final. Sounds just like the perfect environment for innovation, right? Most government agencies that I am aware of are only a little ahead of the Intel 8088 machines. The current calculus suits Silicon Valley just fine because it creates a formidable barbed wire that holds out all others.

Ditching the current rules increases competition. Yes, yes, I know: every child is a winner, but not in real life, only in some mythical world where mediocrity rules. If company A is trying to outvie company B, then it will have to deliver a better product. Current rules favor the giants, like Facebook and Google, and that’s why they favor net neutrality. Again, the Ma Bell conglomerate is to the point here. The **FCC** guaranteed its monopoly and it took, according to one observer, the Justice Department to prevent overpricing.

Ditching the current rules takes the government out of the Internet. Quick, apart from waging war and collecting taxes, what is it that the government does well? The Post Office? Congress? Infrastructure? Are you sure you want government in charge of the Internet? To take only one example from thousands, back when the **Clean Water Act of 1972** was created, that agency decided, on its own, to allow certain things for what it thought was for the benefit of all. The Great Lakes suffered a near demise as a result. My point is, government agencies are not really subject to anyone, often act imperiously, and more often than not, make matters worse, not better. Bear in mind that current rules force the Internet to function under Title II of the **1934 Federal Communications Act**. Does that sound modern to you? Do you even remember what the Internet was like in 1934? Oh, wait.

Ditching the current rules will not result in Armageddon. One of the more oft-cited complaints is that the Internet will slow down to a crawl for some people. **Ian Tuttle** reported that when the **FCC** first tackled this “problem”

in 2010, they could only mention four, **FOUR** examples of anticompetitive behavior, and they were designated as minor. We fear fear, and that’s not a good way to make decisions. Net neutrality is a solution for which there is no problem.

Ditching the current rules secures more privacy. Are you sure you want government, especially *this* government, nosing into your Internet business? Well, it can and doubtless will if the rules remain the same. At least changing the rules places our privacy, which we all know is unicorn-like anyway, in the hands of nongovernment entities.

Ditching the current rules forces Brobdnagian broadband gobblers to pay for that service. Netflix, streaming videos, pornography, and others like them are all hogging the “lanes” on the World Wide Web. Let’s make them pay for it. And while we’re at it, if I want superfast, super wide lanes, then I’ll pay for them, too. Besides, do you really think that an email and a streaming video should have equal opportunity on the Internet? Miss a second or two and the movie is a jumble; a second or two delay on an email is a blessing.

Ditching the current rules is another safeguard against censorship. I’m sure I’m not telling you anything new, but governments have a bad track record when it comes to censorship. If the government controls the Internet, it can also shut it down. Egypt, the Soviet Union, North Korea, Turkey — to name only a few — have all been untrustworthy when it comes to censorship and the Internet. Spreading out that control among many strikes me as a safer bet than leaving it in the hands of government alone.

I could go on, but I won’t. It’s not that I favor jettisoning all the rules. I am, however, in favor of what Layton calls “a light regulatory touch.” Since I have been alive, more regulations have always meant more taxes, more red tape, and more hoops through which to jump. This would be the first time in my lifetime that regulations imposed by government on an innovative entity caused it to thrive.

Are there no good arguments for net neutrality? Of course there are, but many of them seem to me to be fear of what might be, not what is. The UK, Paris, Seoul, Tokyo and other locales have much less Internet regulation, higher levels of innovation, and *cheaper* costs. Does that sound bad to you?

This isn’t an either-or. We can have less regulation and still have some light regulatory control. But it will be a kind of control that benefits everyone, not just big providers, or fat bureaucrats.

Some net neutrality proponents have not done themselves or their arguments any favors. They have subjected **Ajit Pai** and his family to the most monstrous behavior, picketing his house, his family, hounding him and his wife wherever they go, threatening murder, and

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terrifying his children. Even *Slate*, hardly a **Trump** fan, reported on the Internet whackos' ridiculous and illegal behavior. This is not the way to have a discussion in America, and their behavior should be enough to make even the most ardent fan of net neutrality keep an open mind about it.

N.B. Below are a few representative links to articles, both old and new, used in composing this column:

<https://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2014/06/we-dont-need-net-neutrality-we-need-competition/>

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/joshsteimle/2014/05/14/am-i-the-only-techie-against-net-neutrality/#1732bf2d70d5>

<https://www.usnews.com/opinion/economic-intelligence/articles/2017-11-27/the-fcc-is-right-to-toss-out-net-neutrality-rules>

<http://www.dailywire.com/news/18613/7-reasons-net-neutrality-idiotic-aaron-bandler#>

<http://www.breitbart.com/big-government/2014/11/10/7-reasons-net-neutrality/> 