More on Net Neutrality

by M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP-ISSMP
Program Director, MSIA
Norwich University, Northfield VT

With talks on media concentration going on at FCC hearings across the country, I’m pleased to pass on a thoughtful letter from Bill Nelson, Manager of Network Services at a hospital in Minnesota. Mr Nelson wrote to me on this topic several months ago after reading the column on The End of the Internet As We Know It (TEOTIAWKI) <http://www.networkworld.com/newsletters/sec/2006/0501sec1.html>. With his permission, I am providing them here with the usual minor editing. In what follows, “I” refers to Mr Nelson.

* * *

First, it seems to me the ‘Net is very much like the phone company. The ‘Net (just like the phone company) is a collection of providers all selling access to a network of communications resources. The phone system is the totality of systems that communicate using voice. These systems are all owned by individuals who provide their own content in many different languages. Just as it would be wrong for the phone company to partially busy out Joey'Ds Pizza because Pizza Hut paid for such obstruction, it would be wrong for Amazon.com to pay to limit access to, say, rumpusbumpusbooks.com simply because they could afford to pay an Internet service provider (ISP) to do so.

Second, I think you give the average user too much credit and too much power. Just because we don't like something doesn't mean we have the inclination or even ability to change it. I am a DSL subscriber. I chose this over the much faster cable because I can have an account with my local ISP (Qwest), have statically assigned IP addresses and access anything I want. However, I have seen many cable companies limit virtual private network (VPN) transmissions because they wanted to charge for that ability. I pay a premium for these privileges but most of the people I know wouldn't pay for such liberty. Most of the people I know accept limits in the service they are provided because it is easier and cheaper to accept those limits. That acceptance ultimately limits _my_ choices because larger companies don't see the value in providing choices to smaller groups, merely offering uniform access to the lowest common denominator.

I have had DSL service for 6 years. I own my router and can terminate at any time. Due to the deregulation of DSL service, Qwest has changed the terms of its contracts. As of November 2006, I will have to commit to yearly contracts with early termination fees. I don't like this but I don't have any other options. Cable or satellite are the only other providers and they also have contracts to sign; none of them provide options for using a different ISP.

So I ask, do we really have a choice? I recently got more detail on the DSL early termination fees and discovered that Qwest considers a change of ISP (even though still retaining the DSL line) a termination and will hit clients for the fee, unless of course they are changing to Qwest. As I look forward, I fear the day when Qwest says the only ISP I can use is MSN. Then where is my choice? What happens when MSN, AOL, Verizon, and SPRINT are my only choices? What happens when I have to change my phone service because I don't like my ISP? What happens when the ISPs each have their vertically integrated markets and picking one limits my access to
content hosted on the other?

I don't think TEOTIAWKI is upon us. Indeed I tend toward conservative ideals and business models. But I don't agree that anything goes for those who can pay on the ‘Net. There was a time when conservative people felt that there was a public-service element in broadcasting (I realize there is a difference because the airwaves are a public resource). Over time, the bottom line became the only thing that is important. Would you say this has made things better or worse? Would you say we have a more informed society or worse? What happens when that happens in cyberspace as well?

* * *

Readers may contact Mr Nelson by e-mail at <mailto:smelson@gmail.com>.


M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP-ISSMP is Program Director of the MSIA and CTO of the School of Graduate Studies at Norwich University in Northfield, VT. Mich can be reached by e-mail at <mailto:mkabay@norwich.edu>; Web site at <http://www.mekabay.com/index.htm>.

Copyright © 2006 Bill Nelson & M. E. Kabay. All rights reserved.

Permission is hereby granted to Network World to distribute this article at will, to post it without limit on any Web site, and to republish it in any way they see fit.