



Net neutrality

Description

What is Net neutrality :-

- Net neutrality means that ISPs (Internet Service providers) should treat all the content in the internet equally and should not discriminate or favor any app or website over the other on the basis of website, content or user as this kind of discrimination will result in the domination of bigger companies (Ex – Facebook, Google etc.) over startups and small companies.

How it all started :-

- In December 2014, Airtel decided to start charging extra for VoIP (Voice over Internet protocol) calling apps such as Skype, Viber etc. This decision sparked debate on net neutrality in India. TRAI (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India) invited user comments on this.
- 'Internet.org', which was later renamed as 'Free Basics' was launched by Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg with the partnership of Reliance communications in February 2015 in India. Free Basics gives mobile users access to over 30 different websites without any data charges. It was started to bring more people online and to ensure digital equality according to Mark Zuckerberg.
- In April 2015, Airtel launched 'Airtel Zero', which allows its customers to access some apps at Zero data charges. App providers will pay the data charges.
- So, this results in Differential pricing – giving access to some websites and apps for free and charging the remaining. In future, ISPs can make some websites load faster and can slow down other websites, which can't pay extra fee to them.
- In Dec 2015, TRAI has ordered Reliance to suspend 'Free Basics' temporarily by stating that it violates principles of Net neutrality.
- There are two core issues involved here, which are at clash – 'Ease of access to internet' and 'Net neutrality'.
- In India, there is no law on Net neutrality yet.

- In Feb 2016, TRAI backed Net neutrality and barred Telecom companies from charging different prices for data services except emergency services, thereby banned Airtel Zero and Free Basics.

In Favor of Differential pricing of data services :-

- Telecom companies are buying spectrum and infrastructure, which results in high capital expenditure costs. But they are at loss because of OTT (Over the top) services such as skype, whatsapp etc. Their attempts to protecting their investments through differential pricing is understandable.
- Telecom companies stated that Differential pricing will help in promoting innovation and to bring more people online.
- Airtel Zero is a win-win situation, where users can access certain apps for free and startups can reach a wider audience by registering in this program.
- Internet deprived people will be benefited by the kind of initiatives, which gives access to some part of internet for free, such as Free Basics.
- The initiatives like Free Basics can act as a launch pad for people, who don't have access to internet. They will get to know and become comfortable with internet, thereby increasing the number of digital literates.

In Favor of Net neutrality :-

- If Differential pricing for data services for accessing different websites exists, every website and app has to pay fee to Telecom companies and Internet Service Providers for streaming their website/app at a faster speed. Those, who can't pay, will be at loss. It's a big threat to freedom of expression and openness of Internet.
- Absence of Net neutrality could make ISPs gatekeepers of Internet. It gives them all chances of misuse. Deep divisions will occur in the digital world.
- The benefit of freebies will only be in the short term. And the openness of Internet will suffer a lot in the long term. Tim Berners Lee, inventor of the web is against to Free Basics and quoted it as a step backwards.
- The initiatives like Free Basics is hiding business motives under the name of charity. Mark Zuckerberg stated that other websites can join this program, 'if it complies with the specified technical standards'. This will results in misuse, monopoly and paternalistic web.
- Customers, who have data packs too can access Free Basics for free, thus giving it competitive advantage.
- If people are really concerned with bringing more users into the digital world, they can give some data balance for free like Mozilla did to provide access to entire internet, not just a few sponsored sites. Lobbying in the name of digital literacy is not charity.

Other countries' stand on Net neutrality :-

- Egypt also suspended 'Free Basics' services a week after India did the same.
- Federal Communications Commission (US) voted for Net neutrality.
- Europe is now trying to correct its Net neutrality proposal, 2013, which gave privileged access for special services.

- Chile banned Zero rate schemes, which provided free access to some social media platforms.

Conclusion :-

In the absence of law on Net neutrality, misinterpretations of the term may happen and the digital equality is at a risk. So, there is a dire need for framing and implementing Net neutrality regulations.

Afterwords :- Do you support Net neutrality? Feel free to express your opinion in the comment section below. Subscribe to our blog to read answers to latest GD topics.

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