It’s All Business

Google Inc. was born on September 4, 1998 inside a garage in Menlo Park, California. At that time, it did not even have a bank account to its name. Now, “google” is listed as a transitive verb in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, and in 2008 the company reported $21.8 billion in revenues. With so much traffic through their sites and so many users depending on Google for information, why shouldn't cable and phone companies give them “a fast lane for its own content”? Because it violates network neutrality, a principle of indiscrimination in transmitting data through cyberspace. Network providers should treat all packets the same, regardless of its transmitter, receiver, and content. Recently, the same large companies, such as Google, who had built their success on the impartial internet, have surreptitiously withdrawn their support for net neutrality, and policy makers’ commitments to this standard are waverling as well. But allowing preferential treatment to only web companies with the ability to pay ultimately discourages competition. Abandoning net neutrality will lead to a commercialization of cyberspace and alter the very essence of the internet enabling it to serve as the most fertile ground for innovation.

The cable and phone companies are arguing for a tiered internet with different levels of service and speed. Proponents of network neutrality fear carriers may become dangerously powerful under such an arrangement because they can decide which sites and applications should be privileged. But Lawrence Lessig, a Stanford professor specializing in internet law, argues that “carriers won’t become kingmakers so long as the faster service at a higher price is available to anyone willing to pay it.” Lessig’s policy suggestion does deter carriers from gaining content control power, but in the long run a tiered network will eventually create an exclusive club of the wealthy companies and leave fledgling sites and services out in the cold.

When carriers are allowed to offer premium services, they will be incentivized to research and develop better services and technologies. However, by being able to charge more for that top tier service creates a business incentive to continue improving that premium level, but none to develop the current broadband services. In fact, companies would be disincentivized to improve the current system. As the premium services get better and better, the growing difference in speed will make broadband seem stagnant in comparison. It becomes the carriers’ best interest to enroll as many companies as possible in the more expensive, premium services because they will make more money from those accounts. As high speed DSL and cable became available, more and more businesses, public institutions and homes have switched to the faster services because multimedia

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sites like YouTube and Hulu simply need more bandwidth for a pleasant experience. With the development of higher resolution videos and the growing trend of viewing TV shows online, even faster connections will be necessary. Should only the wealthiest internet companies’ traffic be allowed on the faster network? That is effectively forcing users to a particular site.

Allowing tiered services will also alter entrepreneurial incentives and web content on the World Wide Web. Instead of passion projects and research, site developers are likely to move away from a user oriented focus when creating new pages and services and instead focus on monetary gains. The varying tiers of network services present a catch-22 to entrepreneurs: without being able to afford a better quality connection or if it costs more to send more data, one literally cannot afford to host a larger user base. YouTube would not have been able to support and sustain its growth if carriers had demanded checks proportional to its bandwidth usage every month. Sites must first develop a sound business model before expanding – taking the focus away from pleasing users. Facebook has become one of the most popular pages on the web, but it is still funding operations mainly through millions of donations. As a social networking website, it has yet to develop a sound revenue stream, but it has constantly been evolving according to its users’ needs and wants, catapulting itself to the top of web users’ most favorite sites.

The low barriers of entry and equality of all programmers on the web inspired creativity and innovation. Many of today’s most successful sites began as a mere idea or
small personal project; but the creators were all loved exploring new opportunities and had a passion for what they did. They were driven by bringing users what they want and doing it well. It was a meritocracy. But tiered services heavily disadvantage new comers and force them to use their energies on developing a tandem income generating model. Without the ability to pay in that new world, new entrepreneurial ventures cannot successfully compete with older, more established and affluent sites and companies. Tiered services will commercialize cyberspace and deter true innovation and creativity on the internet.

Network neutrality is crucial to the essence of the internet. On the web, everyone is equal. And anyone can contribute if they wanted to. There are many intangibles that make the internet so amazing, and it is not easily replicable. It is what allowed Google, Facebook, YouTube and millions of other sites to become so popular. Google should think back to its humble beginnings and where they wouldn't be today if net neutrality did not exist.