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The Switch

Your guide to net neutrality: Everything you need to know about today's FCC vote

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In just a few hours, the Federal Communications Commission is expected to approve strict new rules on Internet providers in an attempt to preserve a principle known as "net neutrality." It's the culmination of months — or years, depending on how you count — of lobbying, legal entanglements and political bickering. And it will have tremendous implications for the future of the Internet. Get up to speed below.

What is net neutrality, and why would the FCC want to preserve it?

Net neutrality is about the idea of fairness. It holds that Internet providers should treat all Web traffic equally and not speed up, slow down or otherwise manipulate Internet content in ways that favor some businesses over others. It means Internet providers shouldn't slow down services like Netflix, and they shouldn't offer Netflix a "fast lane" in exchange for a fee.

The FCC and President Obama believe that if some Web site operators have to pay extra money to get their content to you, that could make it harder for start-ups and small

businesses to get off the ground. It would also limit the kinds of services and applications available to users. That's why they're proposing new rules on Internet providers, in an attempt to make sure there's no prioritization of some Web traffic over others.

How big a deal is the FCC's vote on net neutrality?

It's not an exaggeration to say that this marks a turning point in the history of the Internet. It's the government's most forceful intervention ever into the affairs of Internet providers, who've historically been only lightly regulated. It's the agency's most momentous decision of the 21st century thus far, and almost certainly its biggest determination since 1996, when Congress last updated the nation's telecommunications laws.

With the vote, the FCC is recognizing that the Internet is as basic a commodity as telephone service. Internet providers will have to obey standard rules applying to privacy, transparency and nondiscrimination — some of the same rules that govern wired telephony.

What will the FCC actually vote on?

The rules lay out several key prohibitions on Internet providers. They include: a ban on blocking, meaning that Internet providers won't be able to stop services like Netflix outright; a ban on throttling, or the slowing down of Web traffic; and a ban on paid prioritization, or the speeding up of traffic, particularly in exchange for money.

In addition to covering providers of "fixed" broadband service like Comcast or Cox, the draft rules will also apply to wireless carriers, such as Sprint and T-Mobile. This is a big

deal for a number of reasons, but the main one is that wireless carriers have never been subjected to full net neutrality regulation. So that means any mobile data you use would be "protected" by these rules.

What will this mean for *my* Internet? Will my prices go up?

This decision has major implications for the future of the Web: Not only does it represent an unprecedented change in the relationship between government and Internet providers, but it also changes how those Internet providers work with businesses on the Internet.

Opponents of the FCC's rules warn that strong net neutrality could lead to new taxes and fees from state governments. But defenders say that even if the rules give the states wider authority to levy charges on Internet providers, states have always been able to make such decisions on their own.

Other opponents worry that the FCC's rules could lead to the direct regulation of retail prices — what Internet providers charge you for service. The FCC insists that its plan

forbears, or waives, those parts of the telecommunications law. But Republicans on the commission argue that the agency could still engage in what's called "rate regulation" in a roundabout way: by entertaining petitions from the public that allege unfairness in commercial deals or other business arrangements. Conservatives argue that responding to petitions would amount to a form of after-the-fact regulation.

Still, it's important to keep in mind the big picture: Nothing about this vote immediately changes what you pay for Internet or how you experience it. In some ways, that's the whole point.

What happens next?

Everyone in Washington is expecting the Internet providers to sue the FCC to have the rules overturned. Even before mounting their legal challenge, they may seek a court order that would temporarily prevent the rules from taking effect.

Who sues, and when, is a really interesting question. Some believe that the biggest Internet providers, such as Comcast, may hold off because they've got things like mergers and other transactions waiting to be approved by the FCC. Suing could hurt their chances of getting those deals green-lighted.

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