

'Hands off' Rx best for the Internet

By Chris Wolf/Mike McCurry
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A doctor would never tell a perfectly healthy adolescent to take a bunch of medicine "just in case" he comes down with something. A regimen of unnecessary medicine is likely to make the kid really sick rather than protect him against illness. A doctor in such a crazy scenario should and would have his license revoked for violating the Hippocratic Oath that instructs "First do no harm."

There ought to be a Hippocratic Oath for government policymakers. That way, they might think more carefully about forcing a cure on an industry, in the form of government regulation, when there is no disease -- indeed, not even the slightest symptom of illness.

Today, policymakers are being pressured into thinking about "prophylactic regulation" of the Internet, just as the Internet has blossomed into the medium we all had hoped for. Hypochondriacs on the sidelines are hectoring Congress to force unnecessary medicine on the Internet under the rubric "regulated network neutrality." The call for new and unnecessary Internet regulation comes at a time that the medium, now in its adolescence, nears a truly productive adulthood.

The absence of regulation over the last decade allowed engineers, entrepreneurs and innovators to provide us the amazing tool for communication, learning, entertainment and commerce that the Internet has become. There was bipartisan consensus when a Democratic president agreed with a Republican Congress to resist calls for regulation of the Internet in 1996 when our telecommunications laws were last seriously rewritten.

This "hands off" approach is why we have such consumer benefits as online commerce, distance learning and better access to health-care information. It is why we have speedy data transmissions and inexpensive worldwide communications capabilities.

Now is not the time to change course and involve the government as the central decisionmaker on how the Internet will evolve and grow.

Small and large companies alike have spent billions of dollars on their voice and data networks and are making huge investments in the future of the Internet and plan to offer myriad new services. This is exactly the kind of investment and innovation that will take the Internet to the next level. It is the essence of unfettered competition.

But pro-regulation advocates want the government to decide how the next-generation Internet will grow. They are all in favor of restricting how Internet players offer services to consumers. Such regulation is offered in the name of consumers but really is anti-consumer, because it will discourage the innovators and ultimately limit consumer choice.

"Net neutrality" means Internet providers need to allow consumers access to everything legally available on the Web. We are all for that and so are the major Internet players. That's how the Federal Communications Commission has defined the concept.

But opponents want "regulated net neutrality," where the government is forced to pick winners and losers in the dynamic telecommunications marketplace.

There are innovators willing to make huge investments in the Internet to provide new services that will delight consumers -- such as on-demand high-definition movies, studio-quality videoconferencing, lightning-fast Internet, and an array of new IP-facilitated telephone services. If we spend the next few years haggling over rules and regulations that will define the market, these innovators will decide investment is too risky.

The government has a role to play on the Internet but it should be limited to such things as protecting privacy, combating fraud and monitoring criminal activity. Getting the government more involved in regulating the Internet will simply slow the amazing creativity of the last decade.

We know government well, and it cannot move smartly and quickly enough to keep pace with the changes being written in the details of mergers, partnerships and fierce competition that the market is already forcing. Government needs to keep its eye on the big picture and the important principles that will ensure access, nondiscrimination and the best price for the consumer. The good news is that regulatory bodies like the FCC are already doing this.

The Internet, now in its adolescence, is healthy and growing nicely. There is not even the slightest hint of illness. Consumers have access to more and more information and services and at faster connection speeds. And the technology companies are making the investments to offer consumers even more Internet benefits. Having government now step in to administer treatments would be bad bureaucratic medicine.

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