Insight

What is Network Neutrality?

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Earlier this year, network neutrality moved from niche issue in cyberpolicy into mainstream news when the DC courts passed a landmark ruling in *Verizon v. FCC*. Two sections of the Open Internet Order, or so called Network Neutrality rules, were struck down by the courts because they ran against long established precedent at the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). (Find a complete breakdown of the Verizon v. FCC decision here) With broadband technologies moving so quickly and industry players constantly jostling for consumers, anyone could have easily missed the memo: what exactly is network neutrality?

Network neutrality is the concept that Internet networks have and should remain neutral to content. In other words, network providers should not slow down, speed up, or censor data, as it is routed from its originator to consumers. According to some, the neutrality of the web's various networks is its defining characteristic. In practice, however, networks slow data in order to check for spam and perform other quality of service operations. While it is an important rallying cry for broader community under the rubric of Internet freedom, network neutrality remains a thoroughly nebulous term.

To be clear, the goal of neutrality is separate from legislation meant to universally impose it. When applied through regulation, network neutrality becomes a price restriction, as it requires all data to be free. In other words, rules of this sort make price differentiation illegal. Pricing, of course, occurs through all sectors of the economy and is widely considered helpful to consumers.