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Do we need Internet neutrality?

By Dana Greenlee, Technology Columnist

There's a lively discussion across the Internet on the concept of Net neutrality, a term coined by law professor Tim Wu. According to Wikipedia.com, Net neutrality refers to "[T]he neutrality of basic Internet protocols with respect to the diverse ways in which they can be used." If that seems too technical, I can summarize: big business versus fairness for Web users. I got that after listening to Mitch Ratcliffe explain it last night.

Ratcliffe is a veteran journalist, media executive, entrepreneur, and regular guest host of WebTalk Radio, the technology talk show my husband and I have been producing over the last seven years. A longtime Lakewood resident, Mitch is very well regarded in the Internet community as a blogger at RatcliffeBlog.com and ZDNet.com (in their Rational Rants blog - blogs.zdnet.com/Ratcliffe). Mitch is co-founder and Chief Scientist of BuzzLogic, a social network analytics and marketing communications platform developer, and works with Audible.com on its podcasting service. Recently, he blogged about Net neutrality and gave us his thoughts on it.

DANA GREENLEE: The idea of Net neutrality is a confusing topic and so few people understand the subtleties and interconnections. Can you define it?

MITCH RATCLIFFE: Net neutrality is a basic principle about access to the Internet. The idea that, if you're going to charge for packets to fly over a network, they be charged at basically the same cost based on the level of service at each end of the connection, not on the costs of the network service provider that carries them. What has happened is carriers are increasingly trying to say, "Look, if you want to get your stuff to our ISP customers quickly, you have to pay us more." They are reacting to the fact that their capacity is being eaten up by bit torrent streams.

GREENLEE: Bit torrent videos, in particular.

RATCLIFFE: As high as 80 percent of backbone traffic now is bit torrent streams. People are making choices about the content they want, watching it, downloading it and maybe not even watching it -- and they're doing it "wastefully" from the perspective of the carriers. Unfortunately, wastefully is the way free communication happens. The carriers are looking for a way to provide tiered service so you can have very high-priority traffic move through the



MITCH RATCLIFFE

network quickly. The problem is that gives them business leverage to demand more money from content providers or from us as customers where they already have a monopoly or duopoly price controlled market and local access.

GREENLEE: In Tacoma, we have two choices for broadband: Comcast and Click Network. That helps.

RATCLIFFE: That's not a lot of competition. But in many markets you only have one choice. In fact, there'd only be one choice in the South Puget Sound area right now if Tacoma hadn't gone ahead and built its own network.

GREENLEE: That network is very competitive to Comcast because it also offers television service as well as broadband access and telephone service. It's not quite as fast as Comcast, but it's very close. If we did have to switch from Comcast because of these unruly regulations and, maybe, port blocking down the line, we'd have a choice.

RATCLIFFE: It can very easily happen. I had a Comcast cable modem connection on which they were blocking a VPN port I was using -- and I know someone out there will say this never happens, but I know several people it happen to, including me -- they wanted \$39 a month extra to unblock that port. It was a VPN port that I used to keep in touch with my office in San Francisco. That's just ridiculous. I Have a very good analogy for this. If you sent a ton of gold and a ton of lead by FedEx and they were both wrapped, you would have no idea which one was a ton of gold and which one was a ton of lead. They would be treated exactly the same. What the carriers want to do is to be able to look at the content, the destination and originating point of the content -- and perhaps even what the content is, whether it's a video or text or whatever -- and then say, "Well, we want more for that type of packet."

GREENLEE: Yet they are a free enterprise business.

RATCLIFFE: The argument is that they could do a tiered level of service to make sure our voice calls got through in real-time. Downloading a movie is something where you could drop packets half the day as long as it was there by the end of the day when you are going to play it. There is high-priority traffic like voice calls -- if you drop bits, you get broken calls -- and there is low priority when you get a file that is not going to be used immediately. The carrier then says we can deliver the stuff that needs to go fast, faster. Well, they could also just deliver everything fast, which is their business.

GREENLEE: Which is what they are doing now.

RATCLIFFE: Yeah, but they want to be able to change their business to go back in time to something that looks a lot more like that carrier controlled environment that we used to live in before the Internet came along. The principle of Net neutrality has been pushed on a variety of fronts and has been endorsed and advocated by people like Vint Cerf, the father of the Internet, and Tim Berners Lee, who invented the Web.

To hear more of Mitch Ratcliff on net neutrality, listen to the current WebTalk show at <http://www.webtalkradio.com> . You can read more of his thoughts on the subject at ZDNet's Rational Rants at <http://blogs.zdnet.com/Ratcliffe/?p=154>