

Security Sidebar: Will Lack of Net Neutrality Increase Hacker Activity?



John Wagon, 2014-22-01

Net Neutrality

Way back in 2010, the [Federal Communications Commission \(FCC\)](#) adopted the [Open Internet Order](#). This order is a set of regulations that provides for Internet neutrality. Essentially, this means that all Internet traffic must be treated equally. Telecommunications companies like Verizon, Comcast, et al. are not allowed to block any lawful data or unreasonably discriminate against any source or destination.

No big deal, right? Well, here's the rub: these companies build and maintain the pipelines of the Internet, and they constantly upgrade them as newer and faster technology becomes available. Since they own and maintain these pipelines, they want the freedom that comes with ownership. For example, they might want to explore various fee structures and charge more money for services that consume more bandwidth (i.e. streaming video). Or, they may want to give priority to a premium customer to ensure that their traffic meets a certain service level. Well, net neutrality says they can't do that kind of thing. All traffic is to be treated equally. If they wanted to charge higher rates for Netflix or YouTube, they weren't allowed to do it...until now.

Court Involvement

It might not be surprising that the telecommunications companies have been none too pleased with the restrictions of the Open Internet Order. And, in our very litigious society, it's also not surprising that Verizon took the FCC to court on this very issue (in fact, the FCC [fought with Comcast](#) back in 2010 on a similar issue...and lost). The essence of the battle was the question of government regulation on the Internet. Open Internet Order supporters claim that government regulation is needed for open and fair access to information while opponents feel that the best way for the Internet to grow and flourish is for the government to stay out of it.

On January 14, 2014, the [D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals](#) struck down the FCC's Open Internet Order in the case of Verizon v. FCC (of course, the FCC is considering an appeal). The following excerpt is from Judge David Tatel's opinion on the trial:

"Given that the Commission has chosen to classify broadband providers in a manner that exempts them from treatment as common carriers, the Communications Act expressly prohibits the Commission from nonetheless regulating them as such."

I'm not a lawyer, so I had to read that last statement a few times before I understood what it meant. Basically it says that the FCC chose to put the telecommunications companies into a category that shields them from the governmental regulations of the Open Internet Order. The bottom line is that the FCC's regulatory powers over these companies has been significantly reduced, and now the companies are free to charge different rates for different types of network traffic.

Here's a potential scenario under the new rules: these companies could start offering a low, medium, and high tier Internet package. Each package would be priced accordingly...low is cheap, high is expensive. If you have the low tier package, you might only have access to certain websites. But, if you have the high tier package, you would be able to get to all the sites you enjoy today...at blazingly fast speeds.

Hacker Motivation

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People hack for lots of different reasons: curious hobby, knowledge gain, malicious activity, government sponsorship, etc. In light of this net neutrality thing, it's interesting to consider the potential actions of the curious hacker...or even the person who might be looking to start his hacking career. This person might be motivated to experiment a little more than normal under these new rules. You all know the story...you want what you can't have. If I tell my kids not to play with a certain toy, suddenly that toy is the only thing they care about.

Let's be honest, YouTube is a critical part of my daily routine...my mind doesn't really get going until I've seen the [Double Rainbow](#) video a few times. That thing is awesome and hilarious. Well, if my ISP offers a tiered Internet package and I only have the cash for the low tier, I might start looking for ways to get to the high tier so I can still watch my YouTube videos (this is all hypothetical, of course). Granted, most people in this quandary might just complain about the lack of Internet awesomeness they once enjoyed, but some might start to experiment with hacking techniques that give them access into their neighbor's high tier wireless network. I'm not saying this is right, I'm just saying it might happen a little more if/when access to the Internet is more expensive.

Parting Thoughts...

- We're never going to stop all the attackers out there, so the best thing to do is protect yourself
- Follow good security practices:
 - use strong encryption on your wireless network
 - load up and turn on a good antivirus solution
 - update/patch your software
 - stop clicking on all those suspicious email attachments...seriously, stop it!
 - limit the amount of information you share with the world via social networks
 - use a strong password, change it often, and never share it with anyone
- Be vigilant and make yourself a harder target than the next guy

If you are my next door neighbor and I can see your wireless network from my laptop, be sure to go for the high-tier Internet package!

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