



Competing 'Net Neutrality' Bills Wend Their Way Through Congress

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WASHINGTON — A major wrestling match in Congress over control of the [Internet](#) features some strange tag teams — rockers and evangelists vs. phone companies and the Bells' usually biggest adversary, cable TV companies.

The most far-reaching [telecommunications bill](#) in a decade has as its main purpose making it easier for phone companies to compete against cable companies in offering the equivalent of cable TV, and streamlining the approval process for both.

The promise to consumers is lower prices and more choices.

But the biggest controversy is a different issue, so-called [net neutrality](#). The idea is that all Web sites should get the same treatment from cable and phone companies for use of their broadband, high-speed Internet lines.

The rockers and evangelists — joined by Microsoft, Google and Yahoo! — fear that telephone and cable companies who control the Internet highway will put their own products in the fast lanes and relegate those unwilling to pay premium fees to poorer quality and slower service.

In their corner are the Christian Coalition, National Religious Broadcasters and Gun Owners of America as well as liberal Web-based entities such as MoveOn.Org and recording artists R.E.M., the Indigo Girls and Moby.

"If Congress guts net neutrality, independent music and news sites would be choked off, consumer choice would be limited and the Internet will become a private toll road auctioned off by companies like AT&T," Moby said in a statement at a recent Capitol Hill event.

Both the House and Senate bills, sponsored by the chairmen of their two commerce committees, respectively Rep. [Joe Barton](#), R-Texas, and Sen. [Ted Stevens](#), R-Alaska, address net neutrality, but in language that critics say is too weak to prevent discrimination.

Phone and cable companies contend pure net neutrality would erode Internet freedom and drive up costs to consumers because online businesses wouldn't pay a fair share of the billions of dollars being spent to provide high-speed service around the country.

"Simply put, net neutrality legislation endangers both the future of video choice and the accelerated broadband investment that is just beginning to gain traction," Verizon executive vice president Tom Tauke testified at a recent Senate hearing.

The more aggressive proposals of net neutrality, Tauke said, "really come down to one thing: government



regulation of the Internet."

Sen. [Olympia Snowe](#), R-Maine, a sponsor of net neutrality legislation, said Congress must provide nondiscrimination safeguards in the wake of Supreme Court and Federal Communications Commission rulings that effectively deregulated broadband services.

"Unfortunately, if Congress does not act, the age of digital democracy will come to an end," she said. "Innovators with great ideas, but without deep pockets, will be relegated to the Internet's 'dirt road.'"

In the House, Judiciary Committee Chairman [James Sensenbrenner](#), R-Wis., and the top Democrat on the panel, John Conyers of Michigan, won committee approval of their net neutrality bill last month.

It requires phone and cable broadband suppliers to give nonaffiliated content producers equal opportunity to reach consumers, and to refrain from interfering with user choice of content.

They're hoping to get a vote when the broader telecommunications bill comes to the House floor, possibly as early as this week.

The main thrust of the House bill is to create a national franchising process for subscription TV to replace the current system where video providers must negotiate contracts on a municipality-by-municipality basis.

Verizon's Tauke said these negotiations with localities can take up to two years, a disincentive for phone companies interested in expanding into video.

Robert Johnson, president of Consumers for Cable Choice, said 96 percent of Americans have no choice in landline cable TV operator, and that the United States is currently 16th in the world in deployment of broadband, just ahead of Costa Rica.

The Phoenix Center for Advanced Legal and Economic Public Policy Studies, a Washington-based nonprofit group, says it has found that cable prices are about 15 percent lower in areas where there is direct competition.

The cable industry, locked in a fierce lobbying and ad war with the phone companies over bringing TV into homes, points out that the Phoenix Center gets financial backing from the Bells.

[Lawrence Spiwak](#), president of the Phoenix Center, said they have been publishing on cable competition for 13 years and "nobody from the cable industry has tried to refute our work."

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