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FCC meets at Stanford on 'network management'

By **Troy Wolverton**
 Mercury News

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The Federal Communications Commission was at Stanford Thursday to talk about the hot-button issue that falls under the broad, prosaic name of "network management."

The discussion centered around the questions of whether and how Internet service providers can block or slow access to specific Web sites or particular online services, most notably file-sharing protocols such as BitTorrent.

Many of the experts who testified at the hearing and members of the public who attended warned that by managing traffic in that way, service providers risked thwarting innovation and stifling free speech. Many urged the commission to enforce the idea of "network neutrality," the idea that service providers should treat each bit of data the same way.

"This is a clear moment of the commission to act," said Ben Scott, policy director of Free Press, an advocacy group that promotes diversity in media. "The future of the Internet depends on it," he added. The audience loudly cheered.

Not everyone, of course, was urging the commission to take action. Although the major service providers were notably absent from the hearing - despite being invited - some panelists took up their defense and argued that they had legitimate reasons for blocking particular services. The minority of Internet users who swap files on peer-to-peer networks gobble up the majority of the available bandwidth, noted George Ou, an independent consultant and former network engineer.

And

others warned about the dangers of regulation.

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There's no evidence that requiring network neutrality will increase bandwidth, reduce prices or encourage competition, said George Ford, chief economist at the Phoenix Center for Advanced Legal & Economic Public Policy Studies. But there are studies that indicate the inverse is true, he said.

"The issue for me is not that we take Internet regulation too lightly, but that we don't take it seriously enough," Ford said.

The hearing, the first held by the entire commission in the Bay Area, came in the wake of reports that Comcast and other Internet service providers were blocking access to peer-to-peer file sharing services and some Web sites, allegedly in part to limit congestion on their networks. The FCC is investigating complaints that Comcast didn't tell customers what it was doing and that it was violating the net neutrality principles the commission had previously laid out.

In recent weeks, Comcast has sought to address some of the concerns by publicly vowing to cease limiting customers' access to file-sharing services and to work together with BitTorrent and other companies to find an amicable solution. BitTorrent is a company that uses peer to peer technology to distribute media files.

But many at the meeting pressed the commission to take action against Comcast anyway, perhaps in the form of a fine.

"These side deals are not the magic of the market at work," said Scott. "They are the magic of a regulatory threat at work."

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