FCC Advances Open Internet Proposal Amid Protests

Andrew Berg

The normally calm proceedings at the FCC's monthly open meeting got heated Thursday, as the Commission voted to advance its contentious Open Internet rules for further comment.

The Commission today voted 3-2 to advance the rules, although each of the commissioners expressed reservations about how the process was evolving.

The most recent proposal leaves all options on the table. The FCC is asking for comment on the possible reclassification of Internet Service Providers (ISPs) that would esstially treat them as public utilities [1]. The FCC also wants to hear from the public and industry about the wisdom of allowing ISPs to craft deals [2] that would give preferential treatment to content providers that paid for it.

Democrat Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel voted to advance the proposal but also lamented the speed at which things had advanced, as well as the misconceptions about the proposal.

"I support an open Internet, but I would have done this differently," Rosenworcel said during a meeting that was broadcast on the FCC's website. "I would have taken time for more input."

Commissioner Ajit Pai, who cast a descenting vote, said that the FCC has no business being in charge of how the Internet is managed, saying if government must be involved, the matter should be turned over to Congress and to the will of the people.

Pai conceded that the rules would be advanced and proposed that FCC elect a group of 10 "distinguised economists", two elected by each commissioner, to come up with peer-reviewed studies on how to proceed.

Thursday's proceedings were disrupted when a woman began a vocal tirade during FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler's remarks on the matter. The woman was escorted away by police.

The protests were an indication of just how passionate the public is about keeing the Internet in the United States free from constraints.

Matthew Howett, practice leader of British research firm Ovum’s telecoms regulation team, said in comments that today's decision highlists the role reversal between the European Union and the United States.

“Go back a year, and it’s almost inconceivable we would be in a position where effectively both Europe and the US appear to have swapped sides," Howett said, noting that before Europe’s Connected Continent package was unveiled last September, most European regulator’s appeared comfortable with allowing carriers to experiment with new business models on the assumption that strong competition at the retail level between ISPs would prevent more serious forms of discrimination and blocking from taking place.

Howett went on to say that the European Commission's Open Internet proposals, as they stand, come down heavily on the side of treating everything equally to the extent that in their current form may actually be unworkable.

Meanwhile, in the United States, he says "the possibility of ‘fast lanes’ remains a distinct possibility, despite the proposals having evolved from a more controversial stance leaked in the days prior."

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