

# Net neutrality debate prompts strong feelings on both sides

By **JADE MCDOWELL** and **PHIL WRIGHT**  
STAFF WRITERS

The internet is up in arms over net neutrality — and the debate is playing out locally, too.

The discussion has been making the rounds after Federal Communications Commission chairman Ajit Pai announced he was recommending the commission reduce regulations on internet service providers, including a Title II protection that designates the internet as a utility like telephone lines. One result would be providers no longer have to treat all web traffic the same, allowing them to prioritize certain websites over others when it comes to download speed or charge customers more for high-speed access to sites such as Netflix.

Much of the battle over net neutrality boils down to a question of whether government regulation or free market competition is the more effective means of keeping the internet accessible.

Joe Franell, CEO of Hermiston-based internet service provider Eastern Oregon Telecom, believes competition, not regulatory control, is the key to a healthy market. For decades the internet was completely unregulated, and he said that's what many people believe allowed it to flourish.

Franell said what Pai is proposing would give providers more flexibility but require them to disclose their practices so consumers could choose companies offering what they were looking for.

"Net neutrality is only a problem when you only have one choice," he said. "If you don't like what a company is doing, go to a different company."

There are fears among consumers, however, that all internet service providers will move in the same direction, leaving few real choices. When American Airlines started charging fees for all checked baggage in 2008 it caused an outcry from customers, but within weeks the other airlines began to follow suit.

Wtechlink co-founder Byron Wysocki of Pendleton said ending net neutrality only seems to benefit stockholders of major communications companies. One downside for consumers could be your internet service looking a lot like cable TV service. Customers might have to pay \$5 for



STAFF PHOTO BY DANIEL WATTENBURGER

**Joseph Franell is the CEO of Eastern Oregon Telecom, which provides fiber Internet in Hermiston.**

a package to watch Netflix, \$5 more to use Facebook and other social media, and so on.

"That, I think, is a very scary idea," he said, and also could hurt the next great website or internet innovation.

Oliver Brown, owner of Game King, Pendleton, plays online games that require large amounts of bandwidth. He said he is opposed to ending net neutrality and concerned with the possibility of paying more to access services.

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**Joseph Franell, CEO of Eastern Oregon Telecom**

"The net is now a necessity," Brown said, and the way to access everything from entertainment to job applications to checking account balances. He said providers charging more for "fast lanes" would hurt the customer.

"For the people who struggle to pay bills and feed kids, \$20 to \$30 extra a month is a lot of money," he said.

The move from neutrality is surprising, he said. The FCC in recent years has fined companies for throttling data and streaming services. T-Mobile, for example, paid \$48 million in 2016 to settle an FCC complaint when the company slowed

data for its heaviest users.

Brown also said he doesn't like the politics of the situation.

"I am really disappointed, you know?" he said. "How are we letting these big companies keep getting more and more advantages? They already nickel and dime you."

Franell can see possible advantages for consumers, however, if providers are given flexibility. He said some consumers might not mind if lesser-used websites take a little longer to load if it means EOT can give them faster video streaming.

"I can't give Netflix preferential treatment on my network, even if all my customers want Netflix," he said.

Franell said most landline phones also are internet-based these days, and regulations prevent him from prioritizing a 911 call over web browsing.

Wysocki also expressed doubts about companies slowing down data. He said that technology is allowing internet speeds to double every 16-24 months.

Social media has been full of warnings that internet service providers such as Charter could divide the internet up into packages like cable TV, holding some websites hostage unless customers pay a higher price for a premium package, or hurting small businesses by slowing their websites to a crawl because they can't afford to pay a premium for preferential treatment. While that would be legal, Franell said people need to remember that the internet was not a Title II utility before 2015 and yet those scenarios were not happening. He feels it is unlikely that a repeal of that 2015 classification would suddenly bring about a dramatic change in users' internet experience.

He also felt talking points about internet service providers being able to sell cus-

tomers' web-browsing data were overblown, since they are "probably the only folks not selling it."

"EOT is not collecting and selling your data," he said. "That's not our business model. That's a Google thing. That's an Amazon thing."

Wysocki, however, said providers would be able to look at what you watch online in real time and discriminate against websites or services they don't like or have a beef with.

Pai said repeal of some FCC regulations could help providers have more resources to expand services in rural areas, and Franell agreed. He said EOT doesn't take any government money and is therefore much less regulated than some providers, and yet about 20 hours of staff time a week are spent on FCC reporting, out of a 15-person staff.

"Every regulatory burden means I'm spending time and money responding to the FCC instead of spending time and money on customers," Franell said.

He also said the move should mean an end to franchise fees from municipalities such as Hermiston, which recently voted to impose franchise fees on internet sales starting Jan. 1.

# High schoolers take on Knowledge Bowl

By **JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN**  
STAFF WRITER

Are you smarter than a high schooler?

It's not as easy to master the knowledge needed to excel in secondary school, as about 65 area students found out Wednesday at Hermiston High School's Knowledge Bowl tournament.

With teams from Echo, Hermiston, Helix, Stanfield and Umatilla — as well as one from Connell High School in Connell, Washington — students answered questions in history, science, mathematics, geography and literature. Each of the three preliminary rounds consisted of 50 questions, and the top three teams went on to compete in the final round.

The winning team was from Stanfield. They were followed by a second place tie between two teams from Hermiston.

To find a champion, students were split into four different classrooms where all received the same set of questions.

"They are very difficult," said Maggie Hughes-Boyd, one of the instructors of Hermiston High School's Knowledge Bowl club. "A lot are things they'll learn as they get older. And sometimes they'll be really

good context clues, so they can guess."

The students from Connell said they compete at tournaments around Washington as well. The small high school has a club that meets during lunch to practice.

Reece Brown, one of two seniors on the team, said some amount of self-training is involved, too.

"Sometimes it's just about being curious," he said. "My favorite questions are just the random ones that I know and that everyone else doesn't."

John Lauck, the Hermiston club's other advisor, said he estimated Knowledge Bowl club had been active at the high school for at least 12 years. Lauck, a former Hermiston High School teacher, now teaches math at Blue Mountain Community College. He worked as one of the readers, joking with students in between questions.

After a math question that no one answered correctly, one student remarked that they had just learned the answer the day before in pre-calculus.

"Why would you forget that if you learned it yesterday?" Lauck asked in mock dismay.

"I have a 'D' in precalc," the student quipped.

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