

Net neutrality proposal riles Texas GOP

By Glenn Evans gevans@news-journal.com | Posted: Sunday, November 16, 2014 4:00 am

The lines are drawn for a fight of Internet proportion, a partisan dustup that so far has remained below more high-profile issues such as immigration reform and Obamacare.

Republican U.S. Rep. Louie Gohmert calls President Barack Obama's call to preserve so-called net neutrality "reprehensible." Sen. John Cornyn and other Senate Republicans call it ill-advised and packed with legal contortions.

Republican Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas did not respond to an email query this past week on his position, but he toes the party line in recent public statements on net neutrality.

An awkward phrase for an even muddier issue, net neutrality basically describes today's Internet protocol in which all users have equal access to content at the same cost.

The president recommended this past week that the FCC use the 1934 Federal Communications Act to classify Internet service providers with phone companies as "telecommunications services" rather than the less-regulated "information services" they say they are.

"While I am committed to the Internet staying 'open' for all users," Gohmert said in an email asking his thoughts on the issue, "I do not think that the FCC should unilaterally apply antiquated regulations written almost 80 years ago to such a dynamic and changing technology; the FCC should be working with Congress to ensure that the Internet continues to grow unencumbered by the federal government and remains a beacon for innovation."

Starting the debate

Obama was spurred by the prospect that Internet service providers, such as Comcast and Verizon, could decide to ask Netflix and other popular content applications to pay more for the greater Internet speeds they need.

Something akin to that occurred earlier this year, when the big Internet service providers allowed so-called back-end connection points — the middle ground between their servers and customers — to become overwhelmed with data, Wired online magazine reported Friday.



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“This meant that for many Verizon and Comcast customers, Internet shows like ‘House of Cards’ weren’t playing very well,” the magazine article said. “Netflix ended up paying the big Internet service providers to solve this problem, but to those who believe in net neutrality, this was a worrying outcome.”

Such worries, including that of a two-tiered Internet for regular users and those willing to pay more, were Obama’s justification for pressuring Federal Communications Commission Chairman Tom Wheeler to speed up development of a regulatory framework for the Internet.

Republicans oppose the president’s proposal, at least partly because they feel Obama is treading on legislative ground reserved for Congress.

“Congress, not five unelected bureaucrats at the FCC, should determine whether or not to regulate or reclassify the Internet as a public utility,” Gohmert wrote.

The Northeast Texas congressman said he is co-sponsoring a bill to block the FCC from implementing any new net neutrality rules.

Gohmert also doesn’t buy into fears of a two-tiered Internet.

“It is reprehensible for this administration to attempt to deceive the public about a fabricated ‘two-tier’ Internet,” he wrote. “It is a shameless effort to deceive Americans into agreeing to give up their Internet freedom to the Obama administration’s control.”

Cornyn replied to a query with a copy of a letter he and five Republican leaders in the Senate sent Wheeler in May.

Treating Internet service providers, essentially, like common carriers such as phone companies would be, they wrote, “potentially impeding the development and adoption of new Internet technologies, and threatening future investment in next-generation broadband infrastructure.”

Cornyn did not reply to a subsequent email asking why companies would be less likely to invest in Internet innovations under imposed net neutrality.

Public comment

Meanwhile, the FCC has collected some 4 million comments as it follows a January court ruling to revamp regulations that were struck down in 2010. The comments reflect polls showing eight out of 10 Americans like net neutrality.

A quick brush through Longview’s Greyhound bus station Saturday revealed two things: people largely have not heard of this debate, and they basically agree with Obama and most of the FCC comments.

“This is a new one on me,” James Criswell of Livingston said. “It’s supposed to be free, man. Nothing’s going to be free anymore.”

Jerry Smith of Nacogdoches said investment in the Internet is inevitable despite the Republicans' fears.

"A company's going to do what it's going to do to be profitable," Smith said. "And that means coming up with innovations. Whatever business plan they feel that's the most profitable, that's what they are going to do."

Debi Suter of Houston was leery of net neutrality opponents.

"The Republicans usually are the ones that want, for the lack of a better word, the upside," she said.

"They do more for the establishment, for the rich."