Net neutrality rules are evidence of India's progressiveness

Even as the US was busy dismantling one of the pillars of a free Internet, India was busy building one. And so, on Wednesday, India announced it had approved net neutrality rules which many experts have termed among the strongest in the world, if not the strongest.

Net neutrality means internet service providers (ISPs) can't discriminate against content, either reducing speeds for access of certain websites or types of content, or practice differential pricing. In effect, it is a recognition that the Internet is a public good, much like a public road, and that it isn't a toll road where there's a separate lane for people driving a certain type of car and willing to pay a certain price.

The arguments for net neutrality are many: that it provides a level playing field to all content generators and companies dependent on the network; that it is an intrinsic, if not often articulated, component of freedom of expression; that it fosters entrepreneurship, innovation; and that it is good for business.

The arguments against it are few, and not particularly strong — that it inhibits companies from making investments and is bad for innovation — although, as evident from the US example, there are many takers for it.

The rules approved on Tuesday provide exceptions for some Internet of Things (IoT) services, and also some so-called "specialised services", and India's telecom regulator and Department of Telecommunications should define these quickly and specifically so that everyone knows what these are. While it is clear that all ISPs will now have to adhere to net neutrality rules which will be part of their new licence agreements, what isn't clear is the kind of reporting they will now have to do to demonstrate their net neutrality.

Still, these are minor quibbles, if they can be called that, and it is likely that they will be addressed soon.

While the rules themselves, and the ringing endorsement of free Internet, is evidence of India's progressiveness, it is also important that much of this was achieved because of civil society action that prompted a progressive policy from a receptive regulator and government. A coalition of activists came together to achieve this objective, and took on Facebook, which was offering Free Basics, a zero-rated app. Zero rating is the process under which ISPs rate zero data consumption to a certain service or app. Free Basics sought to provide limited Internet access.

This is the kind of policy-making model India would do well to follow in many other areas — in terms of both content and process.