

## A welcome move: On India's net neutrality regulations

In a vital decision that will help secure the rights of Internet users in the country, the Telecom Commission has approved the recommendations of the [Telecom Regulatory Authority of India \(TRAI\)](#) on net neutrality. By endorsing steps that call for amendments to access services licences for Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and Telecom Operators, the Commission has made it clear that any violation of net neutrality will be treated as a violation of the licence conditions. It has said that some specialised and emerging services such as Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) may be exempt from the non-discriminatory principles, but these cannot be at the cost of the overall quality of Internet access. Combining this approval with the fact that TRAI had barred telecom service providers from charging differential rates for data services (zero rating, for example), India will now have among the strongest net neutrality regulations. This is as it should be. Net neutrality is the basic principle of an open Internet that does not allow for content discrimination by ISPs. The user is free to access any web location at the same paid-for speed without any discrimination by the ISP.

What is net neutrality and why does it matter?

This proviso has helped [democratise the Internet and undergird its growth](#) from a networked system of computers that enabled e-commerce, social interaction, knowledge flow and entertainment, among other functions. Internet pioneers — including World Wide Web inventor Tim Berners-Lee and Transmission Control Protocol/IP Protocol co-inventor Vint Cerf — have consistently maintained that the principle of net neutrality is built into the structure of the Internet itself. The layers and protocols for connectivity via the network have been erected in such a way that access is seamless irrespective of the nature of the physical infrastructure of the network. It is to the credit of the Telecom Commission and TRAI that this principle has been upheld in India — in contrast, in the U.S., on President Donald Trump's watch, the Federal Communications Commission repealed net neutrality regulations that had been put in place by the Barack Obama administration. The repeal was ostensibly to allow ISPs and broadband providers to invest in new technology although evidence shows that such investment was not affected by the regulations. The other argument for the repeal has been a functional one, suggesting that the Internet is very different today, controlled by a handful of big companies, unlike the much more egalitarian environment earlier; and that therefore, the principle is redundant now. This is misleading. In India, for instance, the steep growth in Internet access and use has allowed for newer services to thrive. The government should now ensure that net neutrality is followed in practice.

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