

Net Neutrality: A Necessity for the Attainment of Information Literacy Goal

M M Naga

C P Uzuegbu

Abstract

This article highlights the importance of the Internet in today's knowledge society and examines how Net Neutrality is vital in the actualisation of the global call for people of the world to develop life-long learning culture. The paper concludes that Information Literacy, which is a fundamental means of empowering people to become life-long learners, would be almost ineffective if Net Neutrality is not enforced and sustained across the globe.

Keywords: Net Neutrality, Information Literacy, Life-long Learning

1. Introduction

The 21st century is principally characterised with the democratisation of knowledge and information. Imperatively, it is only an open, free and fair platform that can foster this century's trend. The platform here and now is the Internet. The Internet is the greatest technology of the current era. Today, it has literally changed everything about life, cutting across economic, political and social cultures. There is barely anything about life that the Internet does not provide clues on. It is not mistaken to state that the Internet has shrunk the whole world into a community. With patience and access to enabling technologies, anyone anywhere can visually tour around the world in a jiffy. People, communities, knowledge, inventions, cultures, traditions, social life, goods and services and various kinds of information can be freely accessed, used and shared globally by anyone in any part of the world. This is a landmark experience in the history of human life.

However, in recent times, these unlimited privileges of the Internet to mankind have faced corruption, marginalisation, discrimination and even deprivation. Internet users in various parts of the world, especially in developing countries, face various encumbrances ranging from slow Internet speed to denial of access to some networks that participate on the Internet. This is a situation that is not only against UNESCO's principles on open access and knowledge sharing initiatives but ultimately hinders the successful attainment of the information literacy goal. In fact, this is the point that this paper is set to justify.

2. Net Neutrality Principles

Although the earliest initiatives that led to the discovery of the Internet dates back to 1960, the perfections in the modern day Internet took place in 1982 with the introduction of a Standard Internet Protocol Suit (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet). The concept provided a globalised network platform for billions of interconnected computers and devices



to exchange data, information and knowledge. To sustain this global project, managing Internet networks and/or investing in broadband facilities became necessary; the idea being to enhance wider access to and farther distribution of Internet connectivity within and across nation. Consequently, multi-million dollar investments began to take place as rich corporate organisations began to dominate the Internet on the capacity of network providers. This situation later metamorphosed into serious competitions among big Internet Service Providers (ISP) and became a clear case by the beginning of the 21st century.

In the year 2004, the United States (U.S.) Federal Communications Commission received the first complaint that some Internet broadband providers were deliberately blocking and/or slowing the Internet traffic of other networks. To avert such unscrupulous practices, the U.S. Federal Communications Commission came up with the 'Internet Freedom' rule (Powell, 2004). However, the Internet Freedom rule rather than becoming a permanent solution to unscrupulous competitions among ISPs became the beginning of the journey that led to the popularisation of the term Net Neutrality in 2015.

Net Neutrality, as a term, was first coined by Professor Tim Wu in 2003. In his article, Tim Wu argued that broadband providers discriminated access to and use of some Internet networks and maintained that stipulated regulations could avert the discrimination by keeping the Internet free and open for everyone (Wu, 2003). This later became a principle as Professor Tim Wu continued to proclaim the need and importance of Net Neutrality up to the year 2010 (Wu, 2007; Wu, 2010). As a fall out, series of supporters emerged among international

organisations, information scholars and communication analysts, requesting legal actions against all forms of restrictions by ISPs or governments on consumers' access to networks that participate on the Internet. Notably, the United Nation (UN), in support for Net Neutrality, described it as a 'real victory' for freedom of expression and access to information since it permits equal treatment for all Internet traffic (<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=50200>).

Simply put, the Net Neutrality call is requesting for government policies that will guarantee human right to access and use any type of data, information and knowledge of their choice hosted on any network participating on the Internet. To achieve this, the following principles were considered:

- ❖ Access to all networks on the Internet should be open, free and fair
- ❖ No broadband provider should manipulate or control the network speed of another
- ❖ No ISP should block or deny Internet users' access to contents of other networks or project contents of some networks to users against their preference
- ❖ The speed and cost of Internet Service provision should be same everywhere to avoid discrimination and marginalisation
- ❖ Laws governing Internet broadband services should be reclassified as public utility

However, as an encouragement for other countries, the U.S. Federal Communications Commission on the 27 February 2015 adopted the Net Neutrality principles by reclassifying Internet broadband services under the telecommunication rules

(Flaherty, 2015; Ruiz & Lohr, 2015). With this, Internet broadband services can be likened to the mobile telephony system that allow users the complete right to subscribe to networks of their choices, call anybody in any other network and discuss anything they wish to discuss freely without deliberate manipulations from the network providers. This kind of laterality – making all Internet users equal towards Internet traffic and access to content networks – is what is required for effective actualisation of the information literacy goal.

3. Net Neutrality: A Basic Explanation

After Professor Tim Wu coined the term Net Neutrality, different but similar definitions have been published under various titles such as Internet Neutrality, Network Neutrality and Net Equality. While it is not likely that further attempts to define Net Neutrality would change its basic meaning as embodied on its principles, it is possible that such auxiliary definitions can increase its understanding and relevance in today's knowledge society. This paper defines Net Neutrality as a global call to standardise Internet speed and charges as well as right to access any website content and other user privileges. This is to say that the same Internet speed, websites and charges someone in USA enjoys should exactly be applicable to people in India, Nigeria, Fiji and other parts of the world.

For instance, at the moment, students in North Eastern Hill University Shillong, India are barred from accessing some websites hosted in Malaysia, China, Nigeria and some other countries when browsing from the university network. This is because the ISP of the university is blocking traffics to those websites/destinations. But, with mobile phone Internet connectivity, students within the

premises of university can access those barred websites/destinations. This is because the ISP for their mobile network allowed Internet traffic to those destinations. But relatively, the charge to be incurred by the student and the traffic speed will vary based on network, broadband category (2G, 3G or 4G) and other associated factors. Probably, the traffic speed and charges may not be as high or as low as it now when browsing via mobile phone network as compared to browsing from the university's network. Hence, a global call to stop such variances is what is called Net Neutrality.

4. The Information Literacy Goal

According to the UNESCO adopted definition, information literacy is regarded as the capability of people to recognise their information needs, locate and evaluate the quality of information needed, store and retrieve information, make effective and ethical use of information and apply information to create and communicate knowledge (Information for all Programmes [IFAP], 2008). As deduced in Garner (2006), the fundamental goal of the definition above is to foster life-long learning which Horton (2013) has described as self-empowerment. Life-long learning was a topic of discuss at the Alexandra Declaration in 2005 and thus refers to the practise of constantly seeking for new knowledge and sharing expertise (disseminating knowledge) across the globe (Garner, 2006; Lau & Catts, 2008). This is the implicit goal of Information Literacy.

Meanwhile, considering the indispensability of the Internet in daily human activities, especially in access to, use and dissemination of information and knowledge, Net Neutrality is sine qua non in the development of life- long learning culture among people of all nations and divers races. Hence, the

situation of denying access to contents of some Internet networks and promoting others is detrimental to information cum knowledge search, evaluation, storage, retrieval, use and dissemination.

In other words, maintaining an open, free and fair access to all kinds of data, information and knowledge hosted in any network on the Internet is essential for effective problem solving, seeking of new knowledge and sharing of expertise (disseminating knowledge) across the globe. This is a life-long learning culture and is apparently the goal of the global call for Information Literacy. In fact, since anecdotal observation has shown that information is appreciated when it is relevant, timely, complete, reliable and accurate; slowing down Internet speed, denying access to some information hosted on some Internet sites, among other encumbrances, is not and will never be in the interest of the global information literacy goal.

5. Conclusion

It is a welcome development that the U.S. Federal Communications Commission has endorsed Net Neutrality. It is also encouraging to note that the UN and its associated bodies such as UNESCO have applauded U.S. decision on Net Neutrality and reiterates its relevance in the freedom of expression as a global human right. The adoption of Net Neutrality by the Chilean, Netherlands and Brazilian governments is also commended. The increasing call from various categories of Internet consumers and Internet application companies is also recognised. But, more efforts are to be made by governments of all the countries in the world, the international community and professional organisations. The benefit of Net Neutrality goes beyond trade and commerce. Apparently, Net

Neutrality has undisputable relevance to scholarship- teaching, learning and research. The world today is in the era where global economy is largely dependent on the quantity and quality of information accessible and applicable in solving life's problems. For this reason, setting up a platform that will allow open, free and fair access to Internet networks in search for information and in the dissemination of knowledge across the globe is vital. Hence, information literacy, which is a fundamental means of empowering people to succeed in today's knowledge society by enabling life-long learning culture, is almost ineffective if Net Neutrality is not enforced and sustained across the globe.

References

1. Catts, R & Lau, J. (2008). Towards Information Literacy Indicators. Paris: UNESCO. Retrieved from http://www.uis.unesco.org/Library/Documents/wp08_InfoLit_en.pdf
2. Flaherty, A. (February 25, 2015). Fact check: Talking heads skew 'Net Neutrality' debate. The New York Times. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/02/25/business/ap-us-net-neutrality-fact-check.html?_r=0
3. Garner, S.D. (Ed) (2006). High-Level Colloquium on Information Literacy and Life Long Learning held at Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Alexandria, Egypt from November 6-9, 2005. Report of a Meeting Sponsored by the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), National Forum on Information Literacy (NFIL) and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). Retrieved from <http://eprints.rclis.org/3829/1/alexfinalreport.pdf>

4. Horton, F. W. (2013). Overview of information literacy resources worldwide. Paris: UNESCO. Retrieved from http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/news/overview_info_lit_resources.pdf
5. Information for All Programme (IFAP) (2008). UNESCO's IFAP to measure information literacy. Paris: UNESCO. Retrieved from: http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=2697&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html
6. Powell, M. K. (2004). Preserving internet freedom: Guiding principles for the industry. A paper delivered at the Silicon Flatirons Symposium on "The Digital Broadband Migration: Toward a Regulatory Regime for the Internet Age" held at the University of Colorado School of Law, Boulder, Colorado, in February 8, 2004. Retrieved from https://apps.fcc.gov/edocs_public/attachmatch/DOC-243556A1.pdf
7. Ruiz, R. R. & Lohr, S. (February 26, 2015). F.C.C. approves net neutrality rules, classifying broadband internet service as a utility. The New York Times. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/27/technology/net-neutrality-fcc-vote-internet-utility.html>
8. Wu, T. (2003). Network neutrality, broadband discrimination. *Journal of Telecommunications and High Technology Law*, 2, 141. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.388863>
9. Wu, T. (2007). Wireless carterfone. *International Journal of Communication*, 1, 389-426. Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

10. Wu, T. (2010). *The master switch: The rise and fall of information empires*. New York: Knopf Doubleday

About Authors

Mr. M M Naga, Professor, Department of Library and Information Science, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya, India
E-mail: mosesmnaga@gmail.com

Mr. C P Uzuegbu, Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Library and Information Science North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya, India
E-mail: chimezie.patrick.uzuegbu@gmail.com