

Freedom and Choice in Broadband Internet Access

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The growing importance of graphics and multimedia on the Internet, has helped to boost demand for fast, broadband network access from homes and small businesses. But if that means less choice among Internet providers, some fear such adverse effects as less freedom to read and speak online, new privacy invasions, more intrusive advertising, and rising access prices.

In the past, and still for the most part today, the dominant access technology (dial-up modems on the common-carrier public switched telephone network) has helped to ensure easy market entry for small, new Internet providers. While some gradual consolidation in that industry seems inevitable, the resulting loss of competitors will be partly offset by new entrants so long as the underlying access network(s) remain open to small firms.

To people concerned about human rights in general, and free expression in particular, that state of affairs has special value and importance. It can be debated whether large or small Internet providers, as a group, are more protective of their users' freedom of expression.

But experience suggests that strong protection of online free expression (including, importantly, the right to create and self-publish computer software of whatever nature) is more likely to exist where anyone, of any political or ideological persuasion, can easily offer Internet access to the public. Such providers can set their own business policies (e.g. on user privacy and accountability). They may also be willing to work with users to deflect pro-censorship pressures from government, business or elsewhere.

Large Internet providers, on the other hand, have a level of visibility that makes them more tempting targets for outside pressure. While such firms also have more resources with which to fend off external influence, their size discourages steps that would alienate mainstream customers who, inevitably, predominate among their user populations.

AT&T's chief executive, in a recent interview, suggested with apparent satisfaction that in a few years, his cable-modem broadband Internet customers might be able to choose among a half-dozen Internet providers. But for reasons suggested above, this would fall far short of the freedom that now (mostly) prevails in this market.

Customers (and the public) need and deserve more.