

Google and Verizon eye web access deal

Richard Waters

Google and Verizon have agreed on the outline of a plan covering key aspects of how internet services are carried over communications networks, establishing what could become a financial and operational blueprint for the next phase of the web's development.

The reverberations from the agreement, which has yet to be unveiled formally, appeared to spread quickly on Thursday, with the Federal Communications Commission calling off industry-wide talks on the same issues. The agency said it had failed to reach agreement on a "robust framework to preserve the openness and freedom of the internet".

The arrangement between Google and Verizon would put some restrictions on the US carrier's ability to block or degrade specific internet services, but still leave it free to charge more to give some services priority on its network, according to people familiar with the plan. It would also leave Verizon completely free to block services on its mobile network, though it would have to disclose any such moves.

Early reports of the arrangement between the largest US internet and telecommunications companies were attacked by backers of "net neutrality", the principle that all internet traffic online should be treated equally. They claimed that it would spell the end of an open, low-cost internet and allow a handful of big internet and telecoms companies to dominate the web.

Letting network companies charge more for premium services in the way that the two companies are planning would eventually prompt them to allocate most of their bandwidth to these services, undermining the free web that remained, said Gigi Sohn, president of Public Knowledge, a Washington-based advocacy group.

"If you allow them to cannibalise the 'best efforts' internet, there will be very little left," she said.

One person familiar with the companies' plan countered that creating a premium tier for the web would not automatically undermine the current open model. The arrangement had been struck in a way that was designed to protect the open web, this person added.

Nevertheless, the prospect of a bilateral deal between two of the biggest players in the debate sent ripples of unease through Washington, where the search for an industry-wide agreement to govern the handling of web traffic has been bedevilled by rival interests.

A mutual arrangement between Google and Verizon risks undermining the search for an industry-wide agreement and could instead establish an arrangement that is beneficial mainly to the two big companies, according to the Center for Democracy and Technology.

Google would not comment on details of the plan on Thursday but has repeatedly said that it wanted to ensure rules that will keep the internet open for start-ups that could become the internet's next giants.

While the wireline internet in the US is largely a duopoly, dominated in most markets by a single cable and telecoms company, the wireless market is more competitive, reducing the pressure for net neutrality rules to also apply in the mobile industry.

Fonte: Financial Times, London, Aug. 5th 2010, Technology, online.