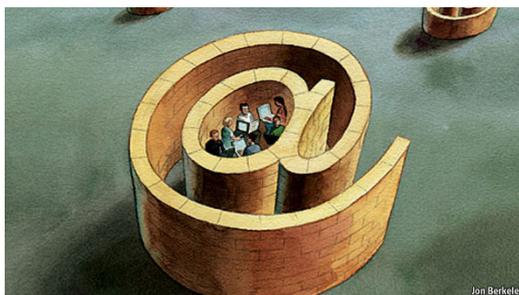


The web's new walls

How the threats to the internet's openness can be averted.



WHEN George W. Bush referred to “rumours on the, uh, internets” during the 2004 presidential campaign, he was derided for his cluelessness—and “internets” became a shorthand for a lack of understanding of the online world. But what looked like ignorance then looks like prescience now. As divergent forces tug at the internet, it is in danger of losing its universality and splintering into separate digital domains.

The internet is as much a trade pact as an invention. A network of networks, it has grown at an astonishing rate over the past 15 years because the bigger it got, the more it made sense for other networks to connect to it. Its open standards made such interconnections cheap and easy, dissolving boundaries between existing academic, corporate and consumer networks (remember CompuServe and AOL?). Just as a free-trade agreement between countries increases the size of the market and boosts gains from trade, so the internet led to greater gains from the exchange of data and allowed innovation to flourish. But now the internet is so large and so widely used that countries, companies and network operators want to wall bits of it off, or make parts of it work in a different way, to promote their own political or commercial interests (see article).

Walled wide web

Three sets of walls are being built. The first is national. China’s “great firewall” already imposes tight controls on internet links with the rest of the world, monitoring traffic and making many sites or services unavailable. Other countries, including Iran, Cuba, Saudi Arabia and Vietnam, have done similar things, and other governments are tightening controls on what people can see and do on the internet.

Second, companies are exerting greater control by building “walled gardens”—an approach that appeared to have died out a decade ago. Facebook has its own closed, internal e-mail system, for example. Google has built a suite of integrated web-based services. Users of Apple’s mobile devices access many internet services through small downloadable software applications, or apps, rather than a web browser. By dictating which apps are allowed on its devices, Apple has become a gatekeeper. As apps spread to other mobile devices, and even cars and televisions, other firms will do so too.

Third, there are concerns that network operators looking for new sources of revenue will strike deals with content providers that will favour those websites prepared to pay up. Al Franken, a Democratic senator, spelled out his nightmare scenario in a speech in July: right-wing news sites loading five times faster than left-wing blogs. He and other advocates of “net neutrality” want new laws to stop networks discriminating between different types of traffic. But network operators say that could hamper innovation, and those on the right see net neutrality as a socialist plot to regulate the internet.

Thus the incentives that used to favour greater interconnection now point the other way. Suggesting that “The Web is Dead”, as Wired magazine did recently, is going a bit far. But the net is losing some of its openness and universality.

That’s not always a bad thing. The profits which Apple harvests from its walled garden have enabled it to provide services and devices that delight its customers, who may be happy to trade a little openness for greater security or ease of use; if not, they can go elsewhere. While some parents welcome Apple’s policy of blocking racy apps from its devices, for example, anyone who dislikes it can buy a Nokia or an Android phone instead. And existing antitrust laws can always be brought to bear if any company establishes and then abuses a dominant position in, say, mobile-phone operating systems or advertising platforms—something that has not happened yet.

Restrictions imposed by governments are more troubling, and harder to deal with. There is not much that outsiders can do about China’s great firewall. But Western governments can at least set a good example. Australia’s plan to build a Chinese-style firewall in an effort to block child pornography and bomb-making instructions, for instance, is daft and should be scrapped. It will be easy to evade, and traditional law-enforcement approaches are a better way to handle such problems than messing with the internet’s plumbing.

Governments inclined to censor might be swayed by arguments that focus on the economic benefits of openness. Duy Hoang, an American-based campaigner for democracy in Vietnam, has suggested that foreign critics stress the internet’s role in fostering trade, development, education and jobs. Similarly, China could be reminded how much more its scientists could achieve if they had unfettered access to information.

What about the risk that operators will fragment the internet by erecting new road-blocks or toll booths? In theory, competition between providers of internet access should prevent this from happening. Any broadband provider that tries to block particular sites or services, for example, will quickly lose customers to rival firms—provided there are plenty of them.

Why net neutrality is a distraction

But that is not the case in America. Its vitriolic net-neutrality debate is a reflection of the lack of competition in broadband access. The best solution would be to require telecoms operators to open their high-speed networks to rivals on a wholesale basis, as is the case almost everywhere in the industrialised world. America’s big network operators have long argued that being forced to share their networks would undermine their incentives to invest in new infrastructure, and thus hamper the roll-out of broadband. But that has not happened in other countries that have mandated such “open access”, and enjoy faster and cheaper broadband than America. Net neutrality is difficult to define and enforce, and efforts to do so merely address the symptom (concern about discrimination) rather than the underlying cause (lack of competition). Rivalry between access providers offers the best protection against the erection of new barriers to the flow of information online.

This newspaper has always championed free trade, open markets and vigorous competition in the physical world. The same principles should be applied on the internet as well.

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