

By Candice Watkins and Ron Wyden

The governing principle of the Internet to date has been net neutrality -- bits are bits, and Internet service providers should not prioritize content delivery based on ability to pay.

Net neutrality ensures that all Internet users can seek out and find information from all points of view without discrimination. It has generated substantial benefits for consumers, entrepreneurs and the users at every one of Oregon's more than 120 public libraries, as well as hundreds more school and college libraries.

As the President of the Oregon Library Association and as Oregon's senior U.S. senator, we share the view that the Internet must remain neutral if it is to continue to support freedom of speech, open new educational frontiers and spur economic growth. That is why industry schemes to create pay-to-play Internet fast lanes have librarians and lawmakers alike sounding the alarm.

Internet providers want to charge an extra fee to content providers to move their information at the fastest speeds. They call this scheme "paid prioritization." In other words, if you can't afford to pay up, your data will be relegated to the slow lane. This means that startups, which sometimes get their start at public libraries, won't be able to compete on the same terms as companies that can afford access to the fast lane.

Here are some other ways that paid prioritization harms Internet users.

First, content providers that pay a fast lane surcharge will likely pass the cost on to their subscribers. This will be a financial burden for public libraries, which according to statistics provided by the Oregon State Library, provide Internet access to thousands of Oregonians every year. Ultimately, it undermines our best efforts to ensure that all Americans have equal access to the information and opportunities created by the Internet economy.

Second, materials such as ebooks, digital music and research databases that Oregon libraries provide to the general public will be delivered at slower speeds. Libraries can't afford to spend more tax dollars to pay Internet providers for fast-lane delivery, which means the materials they make available to serve the public interest will be harder to access than commercially developed content. Paid prioritization would make the Internet a pay-to-play field, and everyone who can't pay will end up losing.

So who are the people that get hurt? All the people with modest incomes who are using a library Internet connection to research job opportunities or start new businesses. All

the high school or college students who are using library-provided research materials for homework projects. The bottom line is that all Oregonians, regardless of income, should be able to access high quality, online information at the same speed and not face painfully slow service.

Rural Oregon is especially dependent on libraries for reliable and accessible Internet connections. According to data provided by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, [40 percent of Oregon's libraries are in rural areas](#). Providing equal Internet access to Oregonians, wherever they live, is vital to local economies and community development.

For example, the Hood River County Library District recently upgraded its internet connection to a fast 100Mbps. That investment, however, would lose its value if significant portions of the web are slowed. And that's just one example among many at Oregon public libraries that thousands of Oregonians use each year.

All the good work that libraries are doing to provide high speed Internet access and trustworthy information to Oregonians could crumble if the FCC allows Internet broadband access providers to segment the Internet according to ability to pay. This is a critical time in the fight for net neutrality. The Federal Communications Commission is writing new rules right now that will decide the fate of the open Internet. It is more important than ever for the public to let the FCC know that Oregonians won't stand for an Internet that is split between haves and have-nots.

Net neutrality levels the playing field and allows everyone equal access to the flow of information on the Internet. That's why we're asking you to join us in fighting to preserve a level playing field online. To learn more about what you can do to support an open internet and net neutrality, visit the Oregon Library Association's toolkit for communities at <http://tinyurl.com/p7ujdtv>.