

Why Net Neutrality Matters and What Research Libraries Can Do about It

Mary Lee Kennedy, Executive Director, Association of Research Libraries

A portion of the United States Federal Communications Commission's reversal of its 2015 Open Internet Order—also known as net neutrality rules—is set to go into effect on April 23, 2018, with the remainder of the repeal to go into effect later this year after final approval by the Office of Management and Budget. The fundamental intent of the open internet is to encourage the free and open exchange of ideas—the very basis of a democratic society. Although the reversal appears imminent, there are efforts to stay or blunt it at the federal and state levels. The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) is part of these efforts, actively advocating for and acting in the interest of an open internet.

Although the exact nature of the impact is not known, there is little doubt that the reversal of the net neutrality rules could reduce access to information used in research and education. The reversal opens up the possibility of internet service providers blocking, delaying, and prioritizing specific content, as well as tracking, recording, and reselling usage data. If the reversal does occur, it is clear that the pursuit of net neutrality is far from over.

This timely edition of *Research Library Issues* includes two companion pieces focused on why the reversal matters to research libraries, providing current facts and expert opinion from Clifford Lynch, the Coalition for Networked Information's executive director, and Krista Cox, ARL's director of public policy initiatives. Both articles detail the implications for research libraries if the reversal goes into effect and set out options for library leaders and their respective institutions to pursue in securing an open internet in the interests of all who seek to do research and learn.

Clifford Lynch calls attention to the potential practical implications for

research libraries and their institutions, presenting possible strategies to work around them. He outlines three scenarios: organization-to-organization access, home access, and access to small content providers. Although organization-to-organization traffic will likely be less impacted by the reversal, research and education institutions often need to reach users at home, where they are connected via “last-mile” internet service. Lynch states up front that the implications are “speculative,” but he says that the reversal is “not encouraging” in light of past behaviors by these last-mile consumer-oriented internet service providers.

Krista Cox’s article begins with the reversal of the 2015 Open Internet Order, outlining the legal and policy options for fighting the reversal, and grounding those options in the implications for research libraries and those who use them. Cox explores existing and potential avenues forward in the federal, state, and municipal arenas, and highlights how Canada addresses net neutrality. Further reference to other countries’ approaches can be found in her endnotes. Her work emphasizes the importance of collective action at all levels of government and through legal challenge though the courts.

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I hope you will find both articles informing and useful as you consider how your library and institution will navigate the issues. Working with and on behalf of our members, the Association of Research Libraries remains committed to net neutrality. For ARL, the open internet is critical to producing fundamental research and achieving dreams. Throttling access will cut off unrealized potential—this seems counterintuitive to the pursuit of knowledge, let alone inconsistent with a democratic society.

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Editor’s note: This piece was revised slightly on April 23, 2018, to update information regarding the date the net neutrality rules will be repealed. A portion of the Federal Communications Commission’s (FCC) order reversing the rules will go into effect today, 60 days after publication in the *Federal Register*, but the bulk of the new order that impacts net neutrality will not go into effect until the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has approved the FCC’s actions.