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Netflix and Other Big Websites Protest Proposed Net Neutrality Rules

By Edward Wyatt

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WASHINGTON – Dozens of websites joined a symbolic protest Wednesday against the Federal Communications Commission’s proposed rules governing net neutrality, which opponents say would result in Internet traffic being divided among fast lanes for companies that can afford them and slow lanes for everyone else.

Netflix, Mozilla, Reddit and numerous other websites have displayed boxes with the familiar “loading” pinwheel icon and messages including, “If there were Internet slow lanes, you’d still be waiting.”

The protest is part of a campaign that has many of those companies and organizations calling for the F.C.C. to regulate broadband Internet service like a utility, subjecting it to strict operating rules and possible rate controls.

The commission has asked for comment on that possibility, but Tom Wheeler, the chairman of the F.C.C., has said that he believes the commission has the ability to enforce net neutrality – the concept that no content provider

should have to pay special fees to be seen online – without taking that step.

Nothing in the F.C.C.'s proposed rulemaking on “Protecting and Promoting the Open Internet” authorizes a division of Internet traffic between fast and slow lanes. The proposal would prohibit blocking of legal Internet content or devices and subject other network management practices by Internet service providers to a “commercially reasonable” standard.

The proposal also asks for comment on “whether certain practices, like paid prioritization, should be barred altogether.” Not barring a practice, of course, makes it potentially legal, and that is the premise that net neutrality supporters have seized upon to say that any creation of a fast lane for those that can pay the toll means anyone who cannot or chooses not to pay is relegated to a slow lane.

David Segal, executive director of Demand Progress, one of the sponsors of the symbolic slowdown, said in a statement, “The cable companies have millions of dollars, but our side will prevail because we have millions of people. More Americans have already spoken out in support of net neutrality than around any other cause that has ever been before the F.C.C., and our growing coalition will continue to fight for an Open Internet until it has been secured.”

Comcast, in a blog post, countered that some of the protesters are falsely saying that cable companies want to “break the Internet.”

“As today’s actions show, the availability and access to lawful content and websites online is ultimately up to the provider of that specific content,” wrote David L. Cohen, a Comcast executive vice president. “We continue to be committed to delivering the same high-quality, high-speed Internet service that our customers rely on each and every day.”

The F.C.C.'s Open Internet proposal remains open for public comment through Monday.

