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Berners-Lee's Talk Goes Back to the Web's Future

March 2, 2007

By Jim Rapoza

When it comes to testimonies in front of congressional committees, the term "sleeping aid" usually comes to my mind. But when I saw that Tim Berners-Lee, creator of the World Wide Web and director of the World Wide Web Consortium, would be speaking in front of the House of Representatives Subcommittee on Telecommunications and the Internet about the future of the Web, I knew I had to pay attention.

But it wasn't because he was saying anything new or all that groundbreaking about the future of the Web. There was nothing new in his discussion for anyone who even slightly follows news about [Web technologies](#).

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In fact, the points from Berners-Lee's talk that were the strongest and most pertinent to me were those that covered the Web's past.

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This is because his discussion of how the Web came to be—and how some of the Web-based products and sites that we all rely on today were created—served as a strong reminder that if the structure of the Internet had been slightly different, none of this would have come to pass.

This, of course, leads to the discussion of net neutrality, which, while it was rarely mentioned in the session, was clearly on the minds of everyone in the room, including the subcommittee chairman, Massachusetts Rep. Ed Markey, who recently introduced a net neutrality bill.

When it comes to net neutrality, I tend to go back and forth on where I stand. Naturally, I want the Internet and the Web to remain completely open. It would be a disaster if major ISPs started limiting sites people could use based on which sites paid the ISP a premium fee.

[Click here](#) to read more about net neutrality.

But I'm always a little leery when Congress thinks it can fix something with a bill. While some bills do work well, there's always a good chance that a bill won't solve the problem it aims to fix and may even make the problem worse (CAN-SPAM is a good example of this type of bill).

Also, I've always thought that if some major ISP decided to start limiting or slowing down access to popular Web sites, customers would revolt and head to ISPs that were keeping the Internet open and non-discriminatory.

But now that I think about it, who would they run to? Here in Massachusetts, I really have only two options for high-speed Internet access: Comcast and Verizon. Since both are against net neutrality, there's little doubt that both would be limiting Web sites.

And as Sir Tim was talking about the Web's past and how the open nature of the Internet made it possible for him to create—without anyone's permission—one of the most powerful inventions of all time, lots of what-if scenarios kept running through my mind.

What if the Internet wasn't designed the way it was? What if it worked more like cell phone or satellite TV networks do here in the United States?

Hey, I hear there's this great search engine called Google that supposedly works really well and offers all kinds of cool online apps. Problem is, you have to be a Verizon customer to get it. And if I leave Verizon, I won't be able to access the eBay auction site anymore, because that's a Comcast-only site.

And if I leave Comcast, I won't get VOIP anymore, as Verizon completely blocks that. Oh yeah, I also hear that the BitTorrent thing you can do on Cox Communications' cable service is pretty cool.

Does this sound ridiculous? Well, just change some of the things around. Like iPhones only on Cingular. Or cell phone TV only on Verizon. Or NFL Sunday Ticket only on DirectTV.

It wouldn't take much for a future Internet to look like these networks. Would that be a plus? Would that help anyone but the Internet providers?

So I want to thank Tim Berners-Lee for his reminder of how the Web was built. He has gotten me off the fence and firmly on the side of net neutrality, even if that wasn't the intended purpose of his talk.

After all, I want to see that future of the Web that he envisions. And I don't think it can happen on a net with fences.

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