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New software helps Internet users detect Web interference

By JORDAN ROBERTSON, AP Technology Writer

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(11-28) 16:44 PST San Jose, Calif. (AP) --

Increasingly worried over Internet providers' behavior, a nonprofit has released software that helps determine whether online glitches are innocent hiccups or evidence of deliberate traffic tampering.

The San Francisco-based digital rights group Electronic Frontier Foundation hopes the program, released Wednesday, will help uncover "data discrimination" — efforts by Internet providers to disrupt some uses of their services — in addition to the cases reported separately by EFF, The Associated Press and other sources.

"People have all sorts of problems, and they don't know whether to attribute that to some sort of misconfiguration, or deliberate behavior by the ISP," said Seth Schoen, a staff technologist with EFF.

The new software compares lists of data packets sent and received by two different computers and looks for discrepancies between what one sent and the other actually received. Previously, the process had to be done manually.

Schoen compared the software to a spelling checker.

"If you really had no idea what you were looking for, this could save dozens of hours," he said.

Increasingly people are contacting the EFF worried that their online activity has been disrupted by their Internet service provider, he said. The goal of the EFF's program is to "help consumers get more clarity about what the ISPs are doing."

An Associated Press investigation, published last month, confirmed in nationwide tests that Comcast Corp., the No. 2 U.S. Internet provider, interfered with attempts by some subscribers to its high-speed service to share files online. EFF, which had been running its own tests, later said its findings were consistent with the AP's results.

The tests revealed that a PC would see messages from Comcast that were invisible to the user that told it to stop communicating, which would lead it to cancel a download or upload.

The AP's tests helped revive the debate over so-called "Net Neutrality," how to treat all types of Internet traffic equally.

Comcast says it does not block access to any applications but does use sophisticated technologies to keep Internet connections running smoothly.

Some online activities, like peer-to-peer file-sharing, swallow massive amounts of bandwidth and can slow Internet connections for other subscribers.

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