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Just Like the Internet You See in the Movies



By Marty Kaplan

No Web sites that choke your browser. No waiting for YouTube clips to buffer. No email attachments too big to send. No files that take forever to download. No “Loading - please wait” messages, or spinning beach balls, or slowwwwly lengthening bars meant to tame your mounting impatience.

That’s how the Internet works in the movies. On laptops and cell phones and the rest of the small screens we watch on the big screen, the Internet is a tantalizingly perfected version of the hiccupping marvel we know now.

In a handful of years at most, the blinding speed and reliability we see in the movies will be available here in reality. Too bad it won’t be available on the Internet.

Last week, Google and Verizon announced their plans for the future. Their message was that if you want to do the cool stuff in real life that Tom Cruise and Matt Damon do online in the movies, you’re going to have to buy a subscription to the other Internet, the superduper one that the telecom and wireless giants are going to build next.

Sure, no one’s going to force you to pay for it. You’ll still be able to subscribe to basic Internet service, the way you subscribe to basic cable TV, which carries all the shopping networks and infomercial channels that anyone could want. But if you want the faster Internet of the future, it’ll cost you. And by the way, you know the sites you like the most? The movies and TV you watch, the music you listen to, the games and social media you play with? Sorry. They’re just too data-hogging. Too popular. Too profitable to carry on basic Internet. Now which of our premium packages would you like to subscribe to?

Of course, Google and Verizon touted their pact, which echoes what AT&T and Comcast also have in mind for us, as a plan to protect consumers from being shafted in precisely the way that Google and Verizon will be enabled by their plan to shaft us.

You would think that some consumer protection agency would stop them. Federal Communications Commission to the rescue! But George W. Bush's FCC voluntarily gave up any authority over the Internet. They voted to classify the Internet as an information system — something like the Associated Press wire service, or Bloomberg, over which they have no jurisdiction — rather than something like, well, the Internet.

But wait: Isn't there a new Administration in town? Didn't President Obama make an explicit campaign promise not to let Big Media turn the Internet into a toll road that favors one kind of content over another?

He did. But the FCC Chairman that Obama appointed, Julius Genachowski, has retreated from that pledge. He could have reversed the Bush FCC, and gained authority over the Internet, with a simple 3-to-2 vote; Democrats have the majority. Instead, the media companies cowed him into weeks of backroom negotiations, like the backroom health care negotiations that Republicans on the Senate Finance Committee bamboozled chairman Max Baucus (D-MT) into conducting. When Google and Verizon became frustrated by the pace of the concessions they were extracting, the talks broke down, and they announced their own Internet policy, as though they, not the FCC, were the regulators.

What emboldened them was the swarm of Big Media lobbyists working Capitol Hill. Congress gets major dough from the industry. AT&T is the top all-time donor to Congress, surpassing Goldman Sachs and Citigroup. Verizon has given more to the campaigns of congressmen and senators than General Electric, Pfizer or the National Rifle Association. It's no surprise that a majority of members of Congress — Democrats and Republicans alike — have written to Chairman Genachowski demanding that he cave to the industry, and to leave the Internet's future in their own well-greased hands.

This battle isn't just about money. Sure, the phone, cable and wireless companies stand to make a fortune if they can jack up the price that content companies and consumers have to pay in order to send and receive entertainment online; that's why they're spending a fortune to stop the FCC and Congress from stopping them. But this battle is also about keeping free speech and free enterprise free.

Right now, the Internet treats all content — including all political and religious speech, and all e-commerce — the same. You can be a blogger whose rants are read only by people you're related to, or you can be pumping out videos riling up tens of millions of your followers, but the Internet is neutral; it doesn't play favorites. You can be a start-up with two employees, or you can be Amazon; the Net Neutrality that exists today means that all entrepreneurs are competing on a level online playing field.

Without the Net Neutrality we have now, there's no guarantee that all content will continue to get the same fair shake. Are you comfortable with handing over to Big Media the power to decide whether some communications are more equal than others?

I sometimes try to figure out how we could have missed coming debacles like the savings and loan disaster, or the sub-prime bubble, or the BP nightmare — how industries could get away with murder in plain sight. I often wonder what next corporate crisis we're staring straight at but somehow can't see. But then I go back to watching some really funny cat videos on my cell phone.