

World Wide Web inventor slams Internet fast lanes: 'It's bribery.'

A quarter-century ago, Timothy Berners-Lee designed the world's first Web browser and server, kicking off a thing that people started calling the World Wide Web.

In a visit to The Washington Post, on Thursday, Berners-Lee said that system is now in danger from Internet service providers (ISPs) who stand to amass too much power over what was intentionally built as a decentralized network — one where no single actor could dictate outcomes to everyone else. Calling interconnection fees bribery (it is a form of extortion what ISPs are doing) Berners-Lee pushed back against opponents of net neutrality regulation who argue that applying new rules on ISPs is tantamount to regulating the Internet. There's a difference between regulating providers of broadband and the services that run on top of it, said Berners-Lee. Strong net neutrality rules would help preserve that line dividing

the two and limit the incentive of ISPs to meddle in the market for services.

"A lot of congressmen say, 'Well, sign up for the free market' and feel that it's just something you should leave to go by itself," said Berners-Lee. "Well yeah, the market works well so long as nobody *prints money*. So we have rules, okay? You don't steal stuff, for example.

The U.S. dollar is something that everyone relies on. So the government keeps the dollar a stable thing, nobody steals stuff, and *then* you can rely on the free market."

When Berners-Lee built the Web, he took the telephone wire coming out of his wall, plugged it into his computer and could instantly connect to any other computer. He didn't have to ask his telephone company's permission to introduce a new feature, he said.

But the rules currently being deliberated by the Federal Communications Commission, which would tacitly allow ISPs to charge content companies for priority access to consumers, would change how easily inventors can spread their ideas. In such a future, Berners-Lee warned, new technologies and companies might crop up faster in other countries if services were forced to "bribe" their way to success.

"We need rules," said Berners-Lee. "If businesses are to move here and start here rather than start in Europe or Brazil or Australia — they're going to look around and

make sure, 'Oh, does the power stay up?' And they'll look for other things. 'Is the Internet open?' Will they have to effectively bribe their ISPs to start a new service? That's what it looks like from the outside. It's bribery."

To many consumers, "the Internet" is simply the collection of applications and services they use on a daily basis, not the technical equipment and business relationships that help shape the economics of the Web. And to Berners-Lee, that's a good thing: It lets people go on with their lives and keep the rest of the economy running.

"How the technical bit — all the deals **about peering all that** — is really complicated and difficult," said Berners-Lee. "That is something normal people in the street aren't going to understand — *and they shouldn't have to!* If you have to start understanding what's happening inside, then the Internet has failed already."