

Why Net Neutrality is Important!

The slick ads for Apple's "revolutionary" new iPhone promise to "put the Internet in your pocket." But the only way to get one of these gadgets is to sign on with AT&T — which limits what you can do and where you can go on the wireless Web.

You don't have to own an iPhone to know why this problem persists: The big mobile phone companies lock their devices so they won't work on other networks, cripple innovative new applications, stifle competition and restrict access to their "preferred" content.

Launching the FreetheiPhone.org campaign

Think about it. The cable company doesn't tell you what kind of TV to buy. You can plug any toaster into the wall at home without the power company's permission. Whether you have a PC or Mac, you still can go wherever you want on the Web. Why shouldn't your mobile phone work the same way?

Ma Bell Doesn't Work

On Wednesday Professor Tim Wu testified before Congress that there's "something weird" about America's wireless market. "It's not like consumer electronics or software markets. It's not like the Internet." Instead he compared the current wireless market to the old vestiges of the AT&T monopoly model. "It's that model which has failed us."

But it doesn't have to be this way.

Today, my group Free Press launched FreetheiPhone.org — a campaign to demand an open, competitive wireless Internet for everyone.

While the iPhone is the current fascination, this issue goes well beyond one single gadget. It's about a dysfunctional wireless system that stifles innovation and competition across the country, while stemming the free flow of information we need.

Real Open Access

What we need is real "open access." Real open access unlocks networks for innovation and wholesale markets for competition. Until we have this, the iPhone — and wireless handheld gizmos like it — will never reach their full potential.

Earlier this week Federal Communications Commission Chairman Kevin Martin reportedly proposed something that is a small gesture towards open access. His plans would allow for device interoperability — imposing what's known as Carterfone principles on a sliver of the spectrum. Merely unlocking devices is only a half-step in the right direction; it leaves us with the same few companies that are trying to undercut innovation and leave us with a slow, expensive network and a vast digital divide.

They can get away with this because there's not real competition. You should be able to unlock your device and use it on any network. You should be able to choose from many providers, competing for your business with better service, lower prices and new innovations. And you should be able to access all content and services without interference from corporate gatekeepers like AT&T or Verizon Wireless.

Breaking Open the Spectrum

That's real open access and politicians in Washington have the power to grant this wireless freedom.

Martin's FCC is about to auction off a valuable portion of the public airwaves that could connect tens of million of Americans to a real open access Internet. This "spectrum" — the 700 MHz band — is so powerful it can carry wireless internet signals through concrete buildings and over mountains. It could connect tens of million of Americans to the new mobile Internet via cheaper gadgets that work in every corner of the country.

"I think that we have a great opportunity with the 700 megahertz to create an open platform that will make sure that we have competition and choice and innovation in the future," Rep. "Chip" Pickering (R-Miss.) said earlier this week.

"Openness is creating a wholesale market. It is creating interoperability for devices so that you can use a device, whether it's an iPhone or another device, with whatever function you choose. If you want to go to a Wi-Fi or WiMax spot and use it, or if you want to have the access to other networks, you can do so. That's openness in wholesale."

Pickering is joined across the aisle by Rep. Ed Markey (D-Mass.) in support of a growing consensus for real open access in America. These two powerful congressmen sit on the subcommittee that — with the FCC — will help determine the future of the mobile Internet in America.

They need to know that the public cares.

If we open up our airwaves to new competitors, protect your freedom to go where you want online,

and unchain the devices — not just the iPhone but whatever comes next — we can create a new kind of mobile Internet, one that is truly open and accessible to all.