

AT&T can't seem to get its story straight on Net Neutrality. For years, company spokespeople had claimed the issue was a "solution in search of a problem." Then in September 2010 AT&T unwittingly defined the problem, as AT&T. AT&T is the problem for Net Neutrality and maintaining an Open Internet. As early as 2008 AT&T lobbyist Jim Cicconi painted threats to an open Internet as a non-issue, and certainly not something requiring action by the Federal Communications Commission.

"I think people agree why the Internet is successful" Cicconi said at the time, adding that threats to openness were largely imaginary. "I don't government can anticipate these kinds of technical problems. Right now I think Net Neutrality is a solution in search of a problem." Fast forward to September 2010 and Cicconi has become a poster child for the problem he once denied.

Getting Prioritization Wrong

In September 2010 one of Cicconi's deputies, Robert Quinn filed a letter with the FCC claiming the company's plans for implementing "paid prioritization" or privileging delivery of certain Internet content for a price would not undermine an open internet. AT&T went so far to even attack public interest and media reform watchdog Free Press, for in their words being dogmatic in disputing this claim. By way of evidence, AT&T wrote the FCC that prioritization is keeping with the Internet's fundamental openness -- supported by the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), the international body that develops and promotes Internet standards.

But soon after AT&T made this claim, the IETF Chairman disputed it. "This characterization of the IETF standard and the use of the term 'paid prioritization' by AT&T is misleading" IETF Chairman Russ Housley told the National Journal.

Housley is not alone. Leading technologists at the Open Technology Initiative and the Center for Democracy & Technology (along with a slew of technology beat reporters) have labeled AT&T's efforts to justify prioritization "misguided" and "misleading."

From past statements it seems that AT&T even disagrees with itself.

Way back in 2009, Cicconi said that Internet "discrimination that impacts consumers negatively is something unreasonable." He later complained "Net Neutrality is an important reality check for government; You pushed to achieve a Utopian end people have dreamed up, but that's not how government works. Government works to solve problems-- and nobody has made a convincing case that there is a problem here that requires the government to step in."

So what's really happening here? AT&T wants to slow down the Internet so it can charge a few deep-pocketed companies for priority access. That is certainly something the IETF never envisioned and

does not endorse, because it goes against the openness that has been essential to the Internet's success.

AT&T calls this scheme paid prioritization. But their misleading definition is just another way to wiggle out of the nondiscrimination principles that have powered the Internet for decades.

Think about it. Cicconi has long claimed that Net Neutrality threat don't exist and therefore don't require government intervention. Now AT&T seeks to demolish Net Neutrality, but it has to downplay paid prioritization to square the circle. In other words instead of calling Net Neutrality a "solution in search of a problem" their saying Problem what problem?