NYT: It’s time for stronger net neutrality rules

The New York Times editorial board is calling on the Federal Communications Commission to adopt stronger net neutrality rules than what is currently being proposed, suggesting the agency should reclassify broadband under Title II of the Communications Act to preserve Internet openness.

Citing recent statements by President Obama, the Times argues that Internet providers should not be allowed to charge Web sites for faster access to consumers. Under FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler's current plan, Internet providers would be tacitly allowed to strike financial deals with Web sites so long as they were not deemed commercially unreasonable — a policy known as "paid prioritzation." Critics of the plan worry that it could result in some companies being unable to pay, or that the costs may be passed along to Internet users.

Obama said earlier this month that "you don't want to start getting a differentiation in how accessible the Internet is to different users. You want to leave it open so the next Google and the next Facebook can succeed."

The Times said Thursday that the FCC should take a cue from Obama's remarks.

"Mr. Obama is sending Mr. Wheeler and his fellow commissioners a message," the Times writes. "They should pay attention."

Wheeler has said that he is personally opposed to paid prioritization because it risks interrupting a "virtuous cycle" of investment by broadband companies and consumer demand for new services.

The Times' editorial came a day after a former FCC commissioner, Michael Copps, requested a meeting with Obama to discuss net neutrality. In a letter to the president, Copps and Craig Aaron, president of the consumer group Free Press, said they did not "seek a meeting lightly."

"If we thought it was anything less than urgent, we would not do so," the two men wrote.

Opponents of stronger rules have pointed out that reclassifying broadband under Title II would not

necessarily prevent Internet providers from pursuing paid prioritization, because the law would only prohibit "unjust and unreasonable" practices. Among those pushing against stronger regulation is the Wall Street Journal, whose editorial board wrote in May that Title II would "automatically impose myriad obligations that have nothing to do with current customer needs."

It wasn't long ago that net neutrality was an obscure issue for the courts. Now it's increasingly become a presidential matter.