

IT for Change, in collaboration with Centre for Advocacy and Research and Free Software Movement of India, is planning a workshop on 'Regulating the Internet in public interest -- Net neutrality and other issues'. With Net Neutrality suddenly becoming a very hot news topic, we would like to have a more in depth look at issues related to regulation of the Internet, including the net neutrality issue. We will proceed from the wide and deep social impact that the Internet is causing, which trend is only going to further intensify. From such an examination, we will try to understand what kind of regulation of the Internet may be needed, not only in the infrastructure layer (the net neutrality issue belongs here) but also the application and content layers, bringing into the discussion the increasingly monopolistic and gate-keeping role that big Internet corporations play with regard to so many important social activities and systems today. It is unfortunate that net neutrality is often presented as a telecom sector versus Internet sector issue. TRAI's (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India) consultation paper titled 'Regulatory Framework for OTT Services (read, Internet Services)', which triggered the current net neutrality tempest, seems to err towards such a false binary. Unfortunately, most responses to the paper, while rightly seeking 'net neutrality', appear to further reinforce such a binary.

It is important to get out of this problematic framing of the problem as a kind of opposition between the telecom sector and the Internet sector, and instead apply the lens of public interest to the issue of regulation of the Internet. Internet is today not only the central paradigm of our communication realm but increasingly also forms the key element of the digitally-mutating new social systems in practically all areas, ranging from media, entertainment, business, work, and governance to education, health and livelihood support. Ensuring an egalitarian architecture of the Internet therefore becomes a key determinant of the possible egalitarian nature of our emerging social systems in various areas. It is this egalitarian principle that underlies the need for 'net neutrality', but it may also require appropriate regulation in other layers of the Internet beyond the infrastructure layer. 'Neutrality' of the Internet is important for free, open and equitable access to information and knowledge, a truly democratic public discourse, freedom of expression, decentralised economic activity, and, in general, for egalitarian social systems, and to ensure economic and social justice for all.

The workshop is intended to be a preliminary exercise for progressive actors to begin engaging with this key policy area, and does not pre-suppose any kind of specialised knowledge from the participants. Depending on how the discussions go, however, it is possible that we may also be able to frame a short response to the consultation paper floated by TRAI.

Venue: India Islamic Cultural Centre, New Delhi.

Time: 9.30 am to 4.30 pm on May 2, 2015.