

# Beware of the banner under which you fight



Parminder Jeet Singh, executive director of IT for Change, has passionate views on keeping the Internet egalitarian. He is one of the main movers behind Just Net Coalition, a global network of civil society actors committed to an equitable Internet. In an interview to LATHA JISHNU, Parminder steps back from the frenzy of the Net neutrality debate to highlight the social underpinnings of the Internet.

Excerpts

**There are widely differing views on Net neutrality. So how does one get clarity?**

It is best to start with an understanding of what Net neutrality is not. Although it is often understood as such, Net neutrality is not a technical principle. Nor is it about free market.

**Why do you say that?**

If Net neutrality is about the right of a user (or consumer) to access and use any content, application or service of her choice, then the question arises: why invoke the state's regulatory authority to disallow many business models which would amount to interference with the free market and free choice? After all, most telcos today appear ready to provide a variety of models, including those observing Net neutrality as a set of "choices" for the customer.

**If that is the case, what then is Net neutrality?**

I firmly believe Net neutrality is about equal opportunity. Just as the common school system is a way to ensure a certain equality of opportunity for all children, Net neutrality should be seen as an attempt to provide equal opportunity to various social actors and activities that employ the Internet for many different purposes. In order to grasp the real significance of the issue the Internet must be claimed for its larger social moorings since it has become a key infrastructure for our social relationships, practising culture, and vitalising democracy.

**What would be the defining principles?**

For me, it is an egalitarian principle that will determine our new social systems, which the Internet is. If we want greater egalitarianism as we go forward, it is important to promote the logic of horizontality and equality that made the Internet such a disruptive force, not only in the economic but also the political, social and cultural spheres. It is as important to check the concurrent trend of rapid centralisation of power in so many areas that the networked social logic has caused. Therefore, the related principles of neutrality, non-discrimination and equity have to be applied meticulously across all layers of the Internet. Today, the key struggle is about the neutrality of the infrastructure or telecom layer vis a vis the higher layers of applications, content and services. Similar struggles will also be required for addressing monopolies, lock-ins and rent-structures in these higher layers. So while it is important to rally, and rally hard, for Net neutrality, one must beware of doing so under the banner of Googles and Facebooks of this world. We need to keep our powder dry for the day when we will be rallying for opening up these entities and ensuring "neutrality" in the layers that they monopolise.

**You have spoken of the false binary of the neutrality debate. Can you explain?**

There is a tendency to see it as a case of "bad telcos" versus "good Internet companies". Remember, it is more difficult for us to shift out of our default applications for social media (Facebook), instant media (Twitter), messaging (WhatsApp) and knowledge work (the Google environment) than it is to change our telecom service provider. This is especially true in places where number portability has been enforced through regulation, like in India. This fact highlights a very interesting blind spot, if not deliberate obfuscation, in the current debates on Net neutrality, where it can be presented as some kind of a stand-off between the bad, exploitative telco sector and the liberating, entrepreneurial Internet sector. Was the same private telco sector not the hero of the "mobile revolution" in developing countries till just a few years ago?

**So what can be done?**

It would be far better to base regulatory decisions on a clear principle: any part or layer of the Internet that exhibits significant monopolistic tendencies should be regulated to ensure "neutrality" for and across actors and activities that use that layer. The Internet is of such a foundational importance to the emerging social structures that it cannot be left entirely to market forces.