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The Switch

Amazon, Kickstarter, Reddit and Mozilla are staging a net neutrality online protest

By **Brian Fung** June 6

Some of the Internet's biggest names are banding together for a “day of action” to oppose the Federal Communications Commission, which is working to undo regulations for Internet providers that it passed during the Obama administration.

Among the participants are Etsy, Kickstarter and Mozilla, the maker of the popular Firefox Web browser. Also joining the day of protest will be Reddit, the start-up incubator Y Combinator, and Amazon (whose chief executive, Jeffrey P. Bezos, also owns The Washington Post.)

On July 12, the companies and organizations are expected to change their websites to raise awareness of the FCC effort, which is aimed at deregulating the telecom and cable industries. Mozilla, for example, will change what users see on their screens when they open a new browser window.

At stake are the government's net neutrality rules, which prohibit Internet providers from blocking or slowing websites or charging them special fees in order for their content to be displayed to consumers.

The digital rally recalls a similar online effort in 2012 by Google, Wikipedia and others to protest federal legislation on Internet piracy. The companies blacked out their websites in an effort to show how the bill could lead to censorship.

Sam Altman, the president of Y Combinator, said Tuesday that many of the small businesses he has helped nurture have gone on to become major players in the Internet ecosystem, such as Dropbox.

“Without strong net neutrality rules, though, I’m concerned that the cable and wireless companies that control internet access will have outsized power to pick winners and losers in the market,” Altman said in a statement.

Some participants, such as Mozilla, are highlighting how repealing the rules could hurt free speech, competition and innovation on the Internet.

“The FCC is endangering Americans’ access to a free and open web,” Denelle Dixon, Mozilla’s chief legal officer, said in a statement. “The FCC is creating an Internet that benefits ISPs, not users.”

Net neutrality is the concept that all Internet traffic should be treated equally by your broadband provider, whether it’s email, streaming music or online video. ISPs say they are largely committed to the principle of net neutrality but have strongly opposed the federal government’s implementation of it. The FCC’s policy regulates Internet providers much like their cousins in the legacy telephone business, requiring the companies to provide nondiscriminatory service to the public. Supporters of the rules say such guidelines are necessary to preserve competition and a healthy Internet where anyone can start a new website.

But critics of the rules, including the FCC’s Republican majority, say the policy is stifling and prevents Internet providers from finding new ways of making money in a world where many major goods and services have gone digital.

“Small ISPs faced new regulatory burdens” under the net neutrality regulations, said FCC Chairman Ajit Pai during the agency’s May open meeting. “Innovative providers had to fear a Washington bureaucracy that might disapprove and take enforcement action.”

Democrats are preparing for an all-out, grass-roots brawl on the issue. Many are hoping for a repeat of the debate over the stalled House GOP health-care plan, a proposal that flopped with most voters. (Only 8 percent of Americans want the American Health Care Act passed as-is, according to a recent survey.) By highlighting the shortcomings of the GOP net neutrality plan, Democrats say, they could make passing the proposal politically untenable.

July’s day of action by companies and organizations in support of the rules appears to fit into that strategy. Although there are few details about what the group plans to do, a website for the protest promises to “make

it easy for your followers / visitors to take action” — implying the organizers could call on Internet users to submit online feedback to the FCC or to lawmakers.

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