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# Facebook's Internet.org affected as India debates net neutrality

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More than 400,000 Internet users respond to a call by India's telecom regulator for feedback on whether firms should be able to charge more for faster online speeds.

PHOTOS



(File photo: TODAY)

CAPTION

NEW DELHI: Net neutrality has taken center stage among internet users in India on plans by some telecom companies for tiered charges for access speeds.

The concept means telecom companies must accord equal treatment to all internet traffic, but some users want to pay more for faster speeds. That has sparked a debate about access policy that has been splashed across newspapers in recent days.

Cyber laws expert and activist Pavan Duggal says the government cannot allow service providers to decide price in an arbitrary manner: "Common consumers will suffer. It is necessary to take proactive steps to prevent this."

For its part, TRAI as the telecom authority is known, issued a consultation paper on net neutrality on March 27 seeking feedback on whether regulations, currently not in place, are needed. This brought the deluge of responses.

Union Telecom Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad said: "The TRAI is undertaking a consultation on the whole issue of net neutrality. I have asked them to give me a report by the second week of May after the widest consultations possible, including online, to help the government come to an informed decision on the issue of net neutrality."

Still, India's largest online retailer, Flipkart, ended talks with telecom service Airtel Zero on faster speeds for some applications. Following suit, other startups pulled out of Internet.org, which is spearheaded by Facebook.

"We looked at it closely and after studying it, we realized that in long term, it can potentially lead to disruption of net neutrality, which is extremely important for us. Really after understanding the

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ramifications, we decided not to participate," said Mukesh Bansal, Chief Executive officer of Flipkart.

Pressure to establish net neutrality has grown. But any action would only follow a report from a telecom regulator panel that would be eagerly read by internet users nationwide.

- CNA/by

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