Internet First - After Net Neutrality

Why in news?

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- After intense debate, the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) has vouched clearly for Net Neutrality (NN).
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- But there is also some merit in the arguments against net neutrality, which calls for further debate.
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What does the verdict imply?

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- According to TRAI, internet services should by non discriminatory with no interference in the treatment of content.
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- This includes practices like blocking, degrading, slowing down or granting preferential speeds or treatment to any content.
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- This means no blocking & throttling of lawful services and no paid prioritisation, except for predefined specialised services like IPTV.
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- The logic is that you should not pay any more for choosing a service or website other than the normal internet access charge.
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- As the DoT is currently immersed in formulating a new telecom policy, TRAI's recommendations could serve as input.
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- Notably, acknowledging the vagueness in defining NN, TRAI has recommended a principles-based approach on a case by case basis.
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How can internet be kept neutral?

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- While adopting a principled approach can indeed be a challenge for which TRAI had one interesting recommendation.
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- It proposed the creation of a not-for-profit, multi-stakeholder body for monitoring & enforcement of regulations in the internet space.
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- The body is envisioned to comprise members representing different categories of service providers.
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- This includes - large and small content providers, representatives from research and academia, civil society and consumers.
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What is the existing internet ecosystem in India?

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- Smartphone users have reached 300 million, Internet users are up by 70 million and mobile traffic grew 75% in 2016.
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- Hence, the touted data revolution will be largely driven by mobile networks, which will provide the base for digital India.
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- Start-up space in India is also promising as some 4,750 tech start-ups operate here – which is next only to United States and Britain.
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- Proponents of NN argue that this has been possible because the net in India is already in a state of de facto neutrality.
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- Notably, an earlier order of TRAI banned differential pricing for content, which has kept the net essentially neutral thus far.
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- The current recommendations are hence essentially a re-iteration of the status quo in the sector.
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What are the arguments against net neutrality?

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- The strongest argument in favour of NN is that it promotes innovation that a censored internet is likely to hinder.
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- This standard narrative in favour of NN assumes two things – \n
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i. Access to internet exists to enable participation
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ii. Open internet boosts innovation activity
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- But about 30% of India's population currently does not have access to the internet and is still largely a privileged good.
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- As affordability is the main challenge, packages such as Facebook's 'Free Basics' will enable internet access for many users.
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- While this will indeed be limited access which is against NN, the subscriber always has the option to migrate to the uncensored net.
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Why is the overall picture hazy?

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- It is clear that projects like Free Basis will considerably bridge the digital gap for the masses.
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- But whether such endeavours will bring grave harm upon the very foundations of open internet isn't clear.
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- The fear is that permitting such proposals might lead to other damaging "Content provider – internet provider" arrangements.
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- This needs further pondering as it can potentially inhibit competition and weaken innovation.
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Source: Financial Express

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