Fact Sheet

The Importance of an Open Internet to Older Americans

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How Many Older Adults Use the Internet?

Internet-based technologies can empower older adults to live more productive, independent, and engaging lives. According to a recent report, 90 percent of American adults connect to the Internet, and 67 percent of those ages 65 and older do so.¹ Eighty-one percent of Internet users ages 50 to 64 go online at least once a day, and 76 percent of those ages 65 and older do so.² To access the Internet, many rely on home broadband (high-speed Internet connection) services (figure 1).

What Is the Open Internet?

The basis of the open Internet, or net neutrality, is the principle that Internet service providers (ISPs) must provide equal access to all legal content and applications. An open Internet ensures that Internet users have the freedom to choose which content they see online and which services they use by prohibiting ISPs from favoring content or applications from one source over another. An open Internet also protects consumers from having some Internet content and services made slower and less reliable because other sources are prioritized over it.

ISPs provide the gateway service through which consumers gain access to the Internet. Many households do not have a choice in the ISP they use for broadband access; the Federal Communications Commission’s (FCC’s) 2016 Broadband Progress Report notes that only 38 percent of US households with access to broadband service have a choice of more than one ISP high-speed broadband provider. Thirty-nine percent of rural households, however, do not have access to any high-speed Internet service at home.³

How Does the Open Internet Benefit Older Americans?

The open Internet helps facilitate the development and proliferation of new products and services that can enhance older Americans’ quality of life, enabling working from home, distance learning, telehealth, and aging-in-place solutions that support independent living.⁴ The Internet can also diminish social isolation among older Americans through online interactions and provide timely access to caregivers and emergency services through wearable and other devices that communicate via the Internet. Increasingly, the Internet is also providing home telephone service as telecommunication companies transition from copper lines to high-speed fiber.
connections. This is particularly important to older consumers because they are more likely to retain traditional home telephone service and not depend solely on wireless cellular phones.5

Risks to Older Consumers
Without an open Internet, ISPs could slow connection speeds for some services and limit the ability of millions of older Americans who go online at least daily to quickly access content that is important to them (figure 2). Further, the cost of Internet services for consumers could increase if websites have to pay ISPs for priority service and then pass these costs onto consumers. The impact is likely to be worse in rural and underserved areas where there are typically no alternative home broadband providers beyond a single ISP.

The loss of an open Internet could also have an impact on VoIP (voice over Internet protocol) telephone services, which allow phone calls to occur over the Internet. Without an open Internet, ISPs could slow down VoIP calls from providers that do not pay for priority services, making phone service slower and less reliable, and potentially making it more difficult for consumers to connect personal medical devices necessary for remote care.

Can Broadband Investment Increase in an Open Internet?
Based on several industry-sponsored studies, some critics argue the current open Internet rules are causing broadband investment by Internet service providers to decline; however, detailed analyses of these studies show that they contain serious flaws and conclude that insufficient data exist to support the claim that broadband investment is being adversely impacted.6 In fact, by many measures, ISPs continue to invest in broadband at a level similar to the period preceding the current open Internet rules. As such, there is no evidence to support the claim that the open Internet rules are suppressing broadband investment.

AARP Policy Supports an Open Internet
AARP policy supports maintaining the open Internet and calls on policymakers to ensure that ISPs comply with the Federal Communication Commission's
2015 Open Internet Order. Many other stakeholders concur with this policy, ranging from start-up companies and libraries to smaller ISPs and large online retailers. Retaining the current FCC open Internet rules is vital to keeping the Internet open and accessible. Without these rules, consumers could face reduced Internet access, higher costs, and less reliable Internet and telephone service. For this reason, AARP continues to support the existing open Internet rules that ensure fair and open access to Internet content for all.

2 Ibid.