



Press Release

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Two-tier internet could put access to public services at risk, warns Consumer Panel

Online access to public services could be put at risk by a purely market-driven approach to net neutrality, warns consumer watchdog the Communications Consumer Panel in its response to consultations from Ofcom and the European Commission.

As networks become more congested internet service providers (ISPs) are increasingly considering charging content providers to prioritise certain types of internet traffic. Content providers could pay ISPs to get guaranteed quality of service for their customers.

“This would improve the quality of service for consumers who want to use these services” says Anna Bradley, Chair of the Communications Consumer Panel. “The danger is that it could result in a two-tier internet, with content from companies who are prepared to pay ISPs for preferential treatment delivering a significantly better user experience. In this scenario, public services could suffer from being in the shadows of more appealing commercial services. This might not be an issue now, but we are seeing the development of exciting new e-health services that could have widespread benefits.”

Much of the focus of Ofcom and the European Commission is on ensuring ISPs provide information to consumers about their approach to traffic management, so consumers can choose the approach that suits them best.

“This is important, but it is not enough” says Anna. “We must have a wide-ranging debate that is informed by a better understanding of consumer needs and behaviour. We need to know what might work for consumers in both the short term, and in the long term to guarantee consumer access to online public services.”

Ends

The Communications Consumer Panel has responded to consultations from Ofcom and the European Commission on net neutrality and traffic management, both of which closed in September 2010. The responses can both be found here:

<http://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/smartweb/internet/net-neutrality>

CONTACTS

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NOTES TO EDITORS

The Communications Consumer Panel was established to advise Ofcom on the consumer interest in the markets it regulates. The Panel is independent and sets its own agenda. Visit www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk for more information.

The Panel's members appointed by Ofcom are:

- Anna Bradley (Chair)
- Fiona Ballantyne (member for Scotland)
- Louisa Bolch
- Kim Brook (member for Wales)
- Colin Browne
- Roger Darlington (member for England)
- Maureen Edmondson (member for Northern Ireland) Leen Petre
- Damian Tambini
- Bob Warner