
Public policy impact on interaction design in networked environments

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Abstract

In this paper we describe some of the issues related to public policy that designers of interactive devices and services could be facing in the near future. Issues associated with network neutrality and information asymmetry need to be taken into account by the SIGCHI community in coordination with lawmakers and groups like IEEE.

Keywords

Information asymmetry, information policy, end-user networking, interaction design, network neutrality

Introduction

This year, Congress will probably vote on the enforcement of network neutrality, a concept at the core of the Internet as we know it today [2]. If Congress decides to enforce network neutrality too strongly, it may make blocking spyware and spam diffusion a tricky operation. If Congress does the opposite, it will leave the network operators to decide which service, data or device is allowed on its “pipes”, effectively creating a multi-tiered Internet. Already today, consumers are faced with issues of accessing content they own over the device of their choice. The song they buy in a music store may not play on their device because of access restrictions such as Digital

Rights Management protection [4]. Tomorrow, these restrictions may be extended to the network connectivity and consumers may have to select a particular connection to be able to optimally perform the activity of their choice. Indeed, executives at both SBC and Bellsouth have announced that they plan to impose surcharges on content providers based on the type of content they offer [3]. As Vinton Cerf, one of the architects of the Internet infrastructure, pointed out to legislators "telephone companies cannot tell consumers who they can call; network operators should not dictate what people can do online." [5]

As the control is moving from the data itself to the connectivity link to access this data, the SIGCHI community needs to research how to inform consumers about their options at the connection level. Our research has focused on designing what can be considered as a label system for connectivity. Device and network connections will be tagged with labels presenting users with information about the type of content and/or activities that they could conduct with this device or over this connectivity. This kind of approach was inspired by the need to inform users about the legality of accessing particular open wireless networks. Such a labeling system would also give home wireless network operators the opportunity to share

their access while explicitly defining the activities they permit over their connection.

This approach could be extended beyond wireless networking to most of the connections that consumers encounter in their daily life [1]. Defining standards and enforcing them through laws may be a required step toward a broad adoption.

Example citations

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[4] Samuelson, P. 2003. DRM {and, or, vs.} the law. *Commun. ACM* 46, 4 (Apr. 2003), 41-45.

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