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Web regulation hearing coming to Stanford

Meeting will focus on principle of keeping network neutrality

By Kristina Peterson / Daily News Staff Writer

The Federal Communications Commission announced this week it will hold a public hearing on Internet regulations at Stanford University next month.

The hearing is the second national discussion over Internet regulations. The first, held at Harvard University in late February, quickly became controversial after Comcast Corp. admitted to paying "seat-warmers" to fill the auditorium, allegedly to save space for employees, according to news reports.

FCC spokesman Robert Kenny said Wednesday's announcement of a hearing at Stanford on April 17 was not related to complaints related to the Harvard event.

"The chair has indicated all along there may be additional hearings," Kenny said. Next month's panel at Stanford "may be the last or the second in several," he said.

The Stanford hearing will focus on regulating information on the Internet and the principle of network neutrality, the philosophy that Internet providers cannot "speed up or slow down Web content based on its source, ownership or destination," and prevents telecommunications companies from giving advantages to sites that use their own search engines or technology, according to the site www.savetheinternet.com.

Terry Rosenberg, managing director of the Oakland-based Media Alliance advocacy group, said the key question in the debate over regulating Internet traffic is whether all streams of data should be treated equally or whether some should be considered "privileged."

"Our basic philosophy is that we cannot leave it up to the telecommunications companies to decide which data will be privileged," Rosenberg said. "That decision has to be made with public oversight and public accountability."

Representatives from Comcast were not available for comment.

Stanford law professor and cyberspace expert Lawrence Lessig said he plans to attend the hearing.

"It is very significant that the FCC will make it possible for Silicon Valley to enter a Washington debate," Lessig said in an e-mail Thursday, calling the questions over network neutrality "critically important to the net."

Lessig, who said he hopes to testify at the hearing, is considered one of Silicon Valley's top experts in the field of Internet regulation, Rosenberg said.

Hosting the hearing at Stanford is "going into the belly of the beast," Rosenberg said.

Kenny said the commission had not yet determined who will be invited to talk next month, but that the event's purpose is "to hear from experts in the area of network management practices" and decide whether new Internet regulation guidelines should be established.

Bob Harrington, a Palo Alto resident involved in the city's quest to install ultra-high-speed broadband Internet access, said he thinks net neutrality should be "fundamental to the Internet worldwide."

In the United States, private telecommunications companies have stifled free competition, making Internet access slower and more expensive than in other developed countries, he said.

"There are a dozen industrial countries out there that are smoking us regarding the quality of our networks," Harrington said.

The April 17 hearing, whose venue has yet to be determined, will be open to the public, but citizens will not be permitted to speak at the meeting. However, those with opinions on net neutrality may submit their comments to the FCC at <http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/ecfs/>.

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