

Lesson Six: Is Net Neutrality Free Speech or Monopoly Abuse?

Part 1: Opening Discussion (3-5 minutes)

The lesson begins with an opening question, which can be written on the board or projected. Students can discuss in pairs:

“Who uses phones and why do they use them? Imagine your phone company could choose to connect your calls with only specific people as chosen by the phone company itself. Who might the phone company choose? How might that affect you?”

The purpose of this question is get students thinking about how the phone network providers like Verizon or AT&T are the link between all users and businesses. If this link is severed or altered, then these network companies could potentially cut off communications between friends, relatives, businesses, etc if those groups do not incentivize the phone company to connect them. Students should recognize that the phone companies will probably only connect people or businesses that are favored by the phone company for some reason. Perhaps, they will notice that the phone company will have the power to charge certain entities to be able to receive calls. Feel free to tell the students that phone companies are regulated by government and that they must, by law, connect all calls equally, though they may charge more for certain classifications of calls, like international or roaming. Have students share answers aloud, and feel free to write down student responses.

Part 2: Introductory Reading (5-10 minutes)

The lesson continues with an introduction, definition, and explanation of net neutrality as well as a good allegory example to help students understand the central issues of net neutrality.

First, pass out the “Net Neutrality” handout. Have students read the introduction section aloud. Reading options include going around the room, popcorn reading (where a student reads and then chooses the next reader), etc. Pause after reading the definition of net neutrality. Ensure that all students are clear on the definition. They can continue on to the example provided for further concrete understanding. Pause again after the questions at the end of the example:

“Which store will more likely get all of the business? Is that fair? Who has the power over where the townspeople buy their groceries?”

Have students answer these questions quickly in pairs or as a class to ensure solid comprehension. Then, finish the reading including the central question of the lesson. Be sure that all students understand the basic question.

Part 3: Examining Both Sides of the Debate (10-15 minutes)

In part 3, students will explore both the benefits of strict net neutrality regulation as well as the potential arguments against net neutrality. In pairs or a group, have the students brainstorm potential arguments in favor of net neutrality regulation. Here, we want students to think about real world implications of net neutrality namely the implication on free speech, commerce, communications, etc. One example answer is provided for the students, and after students discuss and write their answers, share answers as a class. Possible answers might include (though not limited to):

- Allows free and open communication and access to all sites
- Allows greater freedom of speech to consumer news wherever the user desires
- Allows for easier commerce as retail sites don't have to pay a royalty to get faster traffic
- Promotes entrepreneurship, as operating a site will not include payment to Internet co.
- Prevents monopoly power and price gauging
- Prevents internet provider from controlling your internet usage

After sharing answers, have students rank the arguments from the most persuasive and powerful to the least. These answers and their ranking will later be used in the summative role play activity, so it is important that students have written down the answers and ranked them.

After ranking, repeat the process for arguments against net neutrality regulation. Answers may include:

- Keeps costs down by allowing internet companies to charge high bandwidth websites more (like streaming Netflix, which costs much more than normal internet usage)
- Helps prevent illegal file sharing by making file sharing sites work slower
- Helps ISP manage bandwidth usage to provide greatest efficiency
- Free market principles that the government should not be controlling the market or that government is ineffective in most regulations
- Promotes competition among ISP's who differentiate based on preferred sites and higher speeds
- Government oversight to enforce net neutrality could create an invasion of privacy by allowing the government to track internet traffic under the condition of ensuring net neutrality.

Once again, be sure to write all answers on the board, and ensure that students also write and rank answers as they will be used later.

Part 4: Role Play (15-20 minutes)

In part 4, students will conduct a role play activity in which they simulate different real life groups lobbying the government for desired legislation. The purpose of this activity is to bring together all the information from the definition of net neutrality and natural monopoly to the arguments on both sides of the debate. It is also to force the students to analyze and apply the material in real life scenario.

Before reading the scenario at the end of the handout, do the following:

1. Break the class into 5 groups with one group in each of the following roles:
 - Government decision makers
 - Internet Service providers
 - Normal citizens who use the internet
 - Large Online web sites and retailers (Google, Amazon, Netflix, Walmart, etc.)
 - Smaller online retailers and sites
2. Have students read the scenario on the handout aloud. Be sure that each group has selected one or two representatives to speak for that group at the public hearing. Depending on the size of your classroom, you can choose more than two representatives to give more students an active speaking role.
3. Allow students 5-10 minutes in their group to answer the questions listed on the handout. Be sure they reference the arguments for/against net neutrality that were discussed earlier.
4. After completing the discussion, Give each group 1-2 minutes to lay out their argument for/against net neutrality regulation.
5. After all groups have spoken, give the government 2-3 minutes to discuss the arguments and decide what laws should be passed. Encourage thinking outside the box (Can you regulate in some ways but not fully? For example, can you regulate that speed depends on bandwidth, but not just pure discretion?) Make sure students feel that all options are available.
6. After the government has passed whatever laws it decides, be sure to ask why the government decided to pass those laws.
7. Lastly, take a poll of the whole class to see who favors strict regulation and who does not. Consider a whole class vote or discussion on what to do.

By the end of the activity, students should have a strong grasp of the winners/losers of net neutrality as well as the dilemma facing government regulators.

Part 5: Follow Up Assignment (in class or homework)

After the lesson is completed, a homework assignment is provided to reinforce the material and connect it to the students' own world. It is also designed to take no more than 20-30 minutes, though it does require internet research. It is possible to do this research in class for a longer class period or to go over the homework as a review in the subsequent class period.

Note: The FCC ruled in favor of net neutrality though there are several pending lawsuits to challenge this ruling filed by ISPs.