

## What is connectivity?

Connectivity is the ability to get online, facilitated by broadband access. Much of the work the federal government does to improve broadband access has to do with wireline broadband, or the cables in the ground connecting homes, office buildings, etc. The government has several programs to encourage wireline broadband buildout, typically for underserved communities, such as rural areas or educational institutions. The federal government also controls who can offer Internet access via spectrum. The FCC auctions off billions of dollars of licenses for licensed spectrum to companies like AT&T, Verizon, and T-Mobile, who use those to provide Internet and voice services over cellphone networks. Unlicensed spectrum is the airwaves that are open for use by anyone, and these are the airwaves that power WiFi networks. Net neutrality ensures that Internet Service Providers (ISPs) treat all lawful Internet traffic the same. Under net neutrality, ISPs can't block or slow access to websites or online services, and they can't engage in "paid prioritization," or charging websites for better, faster access to users.

## Key Takeaways:

- With a good idea and a connection to the open Internet, a startup of any size, anywhere in the country can launch and grow a global business.
- Startups need policymakers at all levels to prioritize faster, more accessible broadband.
- Net neutrality is crucial for startups and provides a level playing field on the Internet. Without net neutrality protections, ISPs can block, throttle, or charge more to prioritize certain Internet traffic.

## Why does it matter to startups?

With a connection to the open Internet, an entrepreneur located anywhere in the country can create and grow a company that reaches users across the world. As broadband access increases and improves, so too does the opportunity for innovation. Additionally, the availability of unlicensed spectrum has created opportunities for the companies that make and use technology that relies on high-frequency airwaves for wireless device-to-device communications, like Bluetooth speakers or autonomous vehicles.

Net neutrality is what keeps the Internet a level playing field, and these protections are especially critical to startups. Without net neutrality, startups that have an innovative product or service which competes with big companies have to worry about paying to have their websites or services load as fast as those of their competitors.

## Where are we now?

The federal government is constantly working to improve access to broadband across the country, whether by increasing the amount of spectrum available for use by the public or by providing incentives for companies to build out wired broadband networks. As the debate over broadband in D.C. can often become dominated by the large companies vying for either the spectrum or the incentives, it's critical that the startup community regularly weigh in to provide the perspectives of the small companies that rely on Internet access.

After years of attempts and legal challenges, the FCC in 2015 adopted strong net neutrality rules that changed the classification of ISPs to better protect consumers. By changing how ISPs were regulated, the FCC cleared away much of the legal uncertainty that had loomed over previous iterations of net neutrality rules. Unfortunately, after a change in leadership following the 2016 election, the FCC voted in late 2017 to repeal its new rules, leaving in place much weaker obligations for ISPs to merely disclose how they will treat Internet traffic.