

Internet Accessibility in Brazil in
Comparison to Internet Accessibility in America

Fuli Wang

The Pennsylvania State University

INTERNET ACCESSIBILITY IN BRAZIL

Introduction

The Marco Civil da Internet, a ground breaking bill aiming to protect net neutrality and users' privacy had just passed on March 25, 2014 in Brazil. A month later, on April 30th, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) of America proposed new rules that allow Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to charge content providers a toll fee to access their faster lane. Brazil is now considered a pioneer in net neutrality while some media critics announced "the death of net neutrality in the United States" (Hiltzik, 2014). Internet accessibility has been a complicated issue since the day internet was born; however, net neutrality, an element of internet accessibility, has just become the center of the discussion in these two years.

The most concerned issue of net neutrality and equal accessibility are whether ISPs should be allowed to charge users or content providers a fee to get better service over others, and whether government agencies have the right to inspect internet data. The main argument that supports the ISPs is that private businesses should have the right to charge for their service as they like, however, public and small businesses who can't afford to pay this fee will be disadvantaged. The government agencies has been relying on the argument of guarding national security to access internet data, however, if going too far, this can invade users' privacy.

Different sides of the debate have their own interests and demands which makes the issue extremely complicated. Brazil and America have taken very different actions regarding to internet accessibility, and it is still not entirely clear that which system will run better. I believe it is still vital to explore and discuss internet accessibility, because only by doing this, more voices will be heard, more ideas will be inspired, and potentially better decisions will be made.

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Thus, my paper will compare and contrast the different characteristics of internet accessibility in Brazil and America, the different attitudes they have and the different actions they take.

Discussion

Internet Usage, Speed and Affordability

About 100 million people in Brazil now have access to internet, which makes up 49.8% of its total population (World Bank, 2012). Although the percentage of people using internet is not among the world's highest, it is one of the fastest growing internet population due to the country's rapid economic growth. Brazilian netizens enjoy internet mostly through online social networking. According to Latin Link (2013), 30 million joined Facebook in 2012—the biggest increase in any country in the world.

81% of the total population in the United States has internet access, which is much higher when compared to Brazil. However, giving that it is the world's largest economy, its internet user percentage is not among the highest. It is lower than many countries in Europe and even United Arab Emirates and Puerto Rico.

The average internet speed in Brazil is 1.36Mbit per second ranking 34 in the world (Pindom, 2010). The average monthly cost for internet is R\$77.06 (\$34.91) according to Numbeo (2014). With such a speed, the cost is relatively expensive in comparison to other countries in the world. As indicated by the Chart 1, America's internet monthly price is also comparably expensive giving its speed.

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The commonality of these two countries is that they both have large geographic size, which makes it technically difficult and financially costly to build internet infrastructure that covers all the areas with fast speed and outstanding quality.

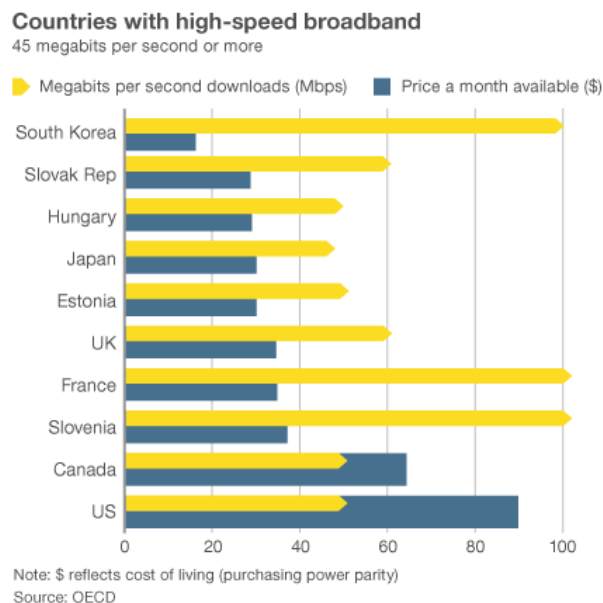


Chart 1. Countries with High-speed Broadband. This chart illustrate the price comparisons among the 10 countries in the world that have high-speed internet.

Internet Accessibility for the Poor

As a developing country, Brazil still has a large percentage of poor people, especially those who live in Favelas, a Brazilian term of slums in major cities. A large number of the Favela residences are illegal immigrants who might not be counted in regular internet accessibility data; however they are a large group of people physically live in the country that should not be ignored. In Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's second largest city, 22% of the city's population lives in Favelas (Soul Brasileiro, 2013). They earn an average monthly income of R\$352 (US\$ 158), so it is almost impossible for a family to afford internet in Favela (Soul Brasileiro). Most of the Favela residents are black or other minorities as well as illegal immigrants. Lots of them work for

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minimal salary or even lower. The Brazilian government refuses to treat them as normal citizens as they are not provided with regular electricity supplies, garbage collection, public transportations and education opportunities. People live outside of Favela are afraid of them because of the high crime rate inside favela and are rarely friends with them. There is little possibility for them to pursue a better life.

In my visit to Rocinhol, a Favela in Rio de Janeiro, I sensed that such a population has a great desire to connect to internet. They believe internet can make them connect to the outside world and learn skills (Brisolla, 2013). Thus, even they can hardly afford internet, they still try to get online by sharing computers and internet among their neighborhood.

The crucial reality is that favela residents are treated unfairly to earn enough to access to the internet. They also do not have many opportunities to use public internet connection like in libraries and schools. While in America, part of the FCC's fund is used to subsidize commercial ISPs to build internet infrastructure in rural areas where, due to the low population density, they can barely make a profit from. The FCC is also responsible to help public library, hospitals and educational institutes wired up with internet so that the public have somewhere to access to the internet if they cannot afford it at their homes.

Net Neutrality

Brazil's Marco Civil da Internet vs. FCC's New Proposal. With the approval of Marco Civil da Internet, Brazil is theoretically the first country in the world that will experience a whole new era of internet environment with legal guarantee of net neutrality and privacy protection.

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From the statement about the content of the bill provided by the government, the bill focuses on the openness of the web, user's privacy and net neutrality in Brazil.

In terms of privacy protection, the regulations seem to be particularly triggered by the leak of Snowden, a former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) employee, who disclosed evidences of America government's world-wide internet spying. The bill requires consumers ISPs to only keep user data for no more than one year.

The most important, and most emphasized part of the revolutionary Marco Civil bill is the regulations on net neutrality.

“The bill requires ISPs to treat all data that goes through their network in the same way, and not set higher or lower speeds for different internet content or services. ISPs also can't suspend users' connections unless in the case of debt, and internet companies are responsible for delivering and maintaining the same quality of service agreed upon in contract terms -- meaning no throttling.” (Schoon, 2014)

As opposite to Brazil, America's FCC just proposed a rule that allows ISPs to treat users and content providers differently. The issue first brought the public's attention when Reed Hastings, CEO of Netflix, on March 2012, complained about Comcast charging a premium fee from content providers who want to distribute their data faster. After two years of negotiation and lobbying, the FCC came up with this proposal that disappointed content providers, internet users and net neutrality advocacy groups.

Public Action on Net Neutrality. Brazilians got really angry after Edward Snoween's leak. The general public and advocacy groups demanded urgently to pass new regulations that protect their personal privacy and the country's security on the internet. Most of the people were

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aware about the American spying, especially when they founded even President Rousseff's emails are spied. They have taken serious actions such as organizing large scale street protests.

In the other side of the hemisphere, the Netflix and Comcast debate didn't attract the majority of Americans' attention except for people who have been keeping close eyes on media issues or people who work in the media industry. There were much less discussions and support from the general public on net neutrality than in Brazil.

Most Brazilians are truly happy and proud of the approval of Marco Civil da Internet. In my interview with Laura Almeida, a Brazilian PhD student at The Pennsylvania State, she said that herself is really happy hearing the bill was passed. She believes that the bill will better protect Brazilian internet users' privacy and offer a fair internet environment. She thinks that Brazilian government is not interested in controlling the internet but has done a fairly good job on improving the democratic internet environment.

Government Action on Net Neutrality.

After the NSA spying scandal broke out in June 2013, President Dilma Rousseff canceled a trip to America on September 2013. The government also has taken effective actions on regulating net neutrality through lawmaking. According to Zdnet, an 'overwhelming' majority of Brazil's Chamber of Deputies voted for the Marco Civil da Internet (2014).

In the case of the United State, the complexity of pleasing multiple parties' interests makes it extremely challenging to guarantee net neutrality. The FCC has been acting irresolute on this issue. Its attitude towards net neutrality has changed. In a congress session in 2009, the Resources, Science, and Industry Division (CRS) states that,

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“Net neutrality restrictions are to ensure equal access and non-discriminatory treatment. Most agree with the general principles that owners of the networks should not control how consumers lawfully use that network; and should not be able to discriminate against content provider access to that network.” (Gilroy, 2009)

The new proposal is a lot different from this statement above.

President Obama although stated many times about supporting internet neutrality and even used this in his campaign, has yet taken effective actions. The President does not have an immediate influence on the decision making of FCC, however, “it’s hard to believe that President Obama has his hands tied, especially with three Democrats on the commission and an FCC commissioner that he appointed by himself.” (Bautista, 2014, April 26)

Conclusion

Brazil and U.S. have taken very different attitudes and actions on internet accessibility, although the situations in these two countries are different. From my research and analysis, I believe that the internet should be an indiscriminate and save space for all the people, so I think the way Brazil handles the net neutrality issue is better to go. However, Brazil should work on providing equal internet accessibility for the poor population as its economic continues to grow.

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