AT&T looking at Internet filtering

DAVOS, Switzerland - AT&T Inc. is still evaluating whether to examine traffic on its Internet lines to stop illegal sharing of copyright material, its chief executive said Wednesday.

CEO Randall Stephenson told a conference at the World Economic Forum that the company is looking at monitoring peer-to-peer file-sharing networks, one of the largest drivers of online traffic but also a common way to illegally exchange copyright files.

"It's like being in a store and watching someone steal a DVD. Do you act?" Stephenson asked.

AT&T has talked about such plans since last summer. They represent a break with the current practice of U.S. Internet service providers, who are shielded by law from liability if their subscribers trade copyright files like movies.

Stephenson said he still sees value in peer-to-peer networks despite some problems. The networks are increasingly used for legally distributed files like movie trailers and software.

Comcast Corp., the second largest U.S. Internet provider after AT&T, has chosen another way to deal with the congestion caused by file-sharers, by hampering some peer-to-peer traffic regardless of whether the content is legal.

The U.S. Federal Communications Commission said earlier this month it would investigate complaints from consumer groups and legal scholars that Comcast's practice violates the open access principles of the Internet.
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