A series of controversial actions by telecommunications companies has given new life to a political movement that would force telecom providers to treat all data transmissions the same.

Senator Olympia Snowe, Republican of Maine, and other members of Congress are renewing their drive for "network neutrality" legislation. A bill cosponsored by Snowe and Senator Byron Dorgan, Democrat of North Dakota, failed to pass last year. No action has been scheduled since it was reintroduced in January.

But Snowe and Dorgan want the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee to hold new hearings on the issue, after several incidents in which AT&T Inc., Verizon Wireless, and Comcast Corp. restricted or blocked Internet communications carried on their networks.

"It basically would be no different if you had a telephone company interrupt your telephone conversation because they didn't like what you were talking about," said Snowe.

None of the incidents would be directly affected by Snowe's and Dorgan's network neutrality bill, which would forbid Internet providers from creating "premium" tiers of broadband service and charging extra fees to transmit data services over these premium tiers. But Snowe hopes that a hearing to investigate the recent controversies will give new life to the network neutrality bill.

Companies such as AT&T suggest that content producers like the video site YouTube should pay extra in exchange for better video delivery. But content producers such as Google Inc., which owns YouTube, are bitterly opposed to the idea. So is Snowe, who suggests that a premium-priced Internet will be dominated by giant corporations, while independent entrepreneurs will be frozen out. "It's going to discriminate against a whole group of people who don't have the wherewithal," she said.

Representative Ed Markey, Democrat of Malden and a key congressional backer of network neutrality, said that the recent incidents may justify legislative action. "Simple rules ensuring openness and fairness on the Internet may be necessary," Markey said. "It's heating up, and it's something I'm going to be in the middle of."

In August, as AT&T's Internet service carried a live performance by the band Pearl Jam, the company censored comments by lead singer Eddie Vedder that
Pearl Jam, the company censored comments by lead singer Eddie Vedder that criticized President Bush. AT&T later apologized for the action.

In September, Verizon Wireless prevented the abortion-rights group NARAL Pro-Choice America from sending text messages to supporters over Verizon's cellular text messaging system, because of a Verizon policy barring "controversial or unsavory" messages. Verizon later said it was abandoning this policy.

Then in October, an investigation by the Associated Press revealed that Comcast's high-speed Internet service deliberately slows down file transfers made with a program called BitTorrent, which is commonly used to swap large movie and music files. Comcast customers had not been informed of the policy.

Comcast senior vice president Mitch Bowling said that BitTorrent users absorb a disproportionate amount of network capacity. That makes it necessary to throttle back BitTorrent transfers so that e-mails and other Internet traffic can get through. Bowling also said that BitTorrent slowdowns are based only on the quantity of traffic, not its content, which is not monitored by Comcast.

Snowe said that there may be a legitimate need for Comcast to limit some traffic in order to manage its network, and that the Verizon and AT&T incidents may have been isolated blunders. But she wants hearings to determine whether legislation may be needed to establish guidelines for network operators. "I think we need to glean what the issues are and get more transparency," Snowe said.

Jim Harper, director of information policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, agreed that network operators have made some poor decisions recently. But Harper said Internet performance could suffer if network managers were barred from setting limits on their traffic. "How do you write a law about this?" Harper said. "This is technically challenging and unsettled."

As for the controversies at AT&T and Verizon Wireless, Harper noted that both companies quickly changed their policies under fire.

"I think this is a really good example of the market working quite well," he said, "because a lot of people were investigating and talking about this."

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