

How To Protect the Internet from Becoming the Splinternet



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In a few short decades, the Internet has enabled human collaboration and innovation that has fueled the growth of national economies, improved access to education and employment, allowed people to solve cross-border challenges, and kept us connected during a pandemic.

However, governments, businesses, and organizations worldwide are increasingly making decisions that could undermine the way the Internet works—and they might not know it. If we don't protect the Internet, this will eventually result in what we call the "splinternet".

What Is the Splinternet?

The splinternet is the opposite of the Internet. The splinternet is the idea that the open, globally connected Internet we all use splinters into a collection of isolated networks controlled by governments or corporations.

The splinternet would shatter decades' worth of global connectivity efforts. The many networks that make the Internet today would no longer work together. This would alter our daily experiences online and restrict who can access and contribute to this global resource. It could also have devastating consequences on trade, national economies, innovation, the free flow of information, international humanitarian efforts, and much more.

How Would the Splinternet Impact Our Experiences Online?

A splinternet could impact our experiences online in many ways. From disrupting our day-to-day communications, to impeding the growth of digital economies, it would affect us all.

Social Media

The Internet: You wake up in Canada, log on to a photo-sharing app, and know that you will have the same experience with this service in Canada as you would in Singapore.

The splinternet: You can't access a photo-sharing app because the business that owns this app doesn't have a version that complies with local regulations about content sharing.



Email

The Internet: You send an email to a friend in another country to ask if their flight is on schedule for their upcoming visit. They reply letting you know there is a delay, and they won't arrive at the airport until the next day.

The splinternet: Your email bounces because the email service provider in your friend's country uses servers in a country that was disconnected from the global Internet.

Digital Economy

The Internet: Your business is able to grow in new markets now that you have a website that lets people around the world find and buy your products online.

The splinternet: Some people will never be able to discover your products because, in some parts of the world, people are on splintered networks that must pay extra to visit websites in your region.

How Is the Splinternet Different from the Internet?

To understand the difference between the Internet and the splinternet, it is important to know what makes the Internet 'the Internet' in the first place.

What the Internet needs to exist:

The Internet is a group of networks held together by a foundation of five critical properties. For a network to be considered part of the Internet, it must have:

- **An accessible infrastructure with a common protocol**—this enables us to collaborate across the world without national borders.
- **An open architecture of interoperable and reusable building blocks**—this fuels innovation by keeping the Internet simple, allowing us to build features quickly on top.
- **Decentralized management and a single distributed routing system**—this helps the network grow and evolve, and allows data to keep taking the most efficient way to reach its destination.
- **Common global identifiers**—this makes sure we can get to the correct destination online, whether it's a website, or connecting with your work server from home.
- **A technology neutral and general-purpose network**—this allows us to innovate, because the Internet is designed with no specific purpose. It can evolve to support new services and ideas.

A network must have all of these properties to be considered part of the Internet.



A splinternet would see the Internet break into many isolated networks that are no longer seamlessly bound by this foundation of properties. These networks might still use the same names and protocols as the global Internet, but governments and businesses would become gatekeepers for what we can do, see, and access on these networks.

The more networks become part of the splinternet, the more the Internet—and all its benefits—starts to shrink.

What Can Cause a Splinternet?

There are many different paths that can lead to a splinternet. These include:

Internet shutdowns: When a government tries to disconnect the networks within its borders from the global Internet, it has serious consequences for citizens. The more governments drive a wedge between networks and the Internet, the closer we get to a splinternet.

Politicized decisions about Internet access and infrastructure: Governments and businesses are increasingly making politically motivated decisions that could disconnect networks in other countries from the Internet's infrastructure. For example, the war in Ukraine has led to calls to interfere with the Internet. Additionally, political sanctions against Russia have had the (possibly unintended) consequence of disconnecting Russian networks from Internet infrastructure. Any one of these actions could set a dangerous precedent, sparking similar actions worldwide, leading to a splinternet.

Policies and business decisions that don't protect the Internet: Governments and businesses are similarly making policies and decisions that could disrupt networks from being part of the global Internet. A single decision may not cause a global splinternet. But just as each raindrop contributes to a flood, every policy, regulation, or business decision that fails to protect what the Internet needs to exist contributes to the growth of the splinternet.



How to Protect the Open, Globally Connected, Secure, and Trustworthy Internet

The Internet's simple foundation is one of the reasons it works so seamlessly for everyone. A splinternet would introduce barriers to collaboration and hinder our ability to work, learn, innovate, grow national economies, help people in crisis, and stay connected to each other across the world.

The Internet is for everyone, and it is our collective responsibility to protect it. To prevent the splinternet, we must:

- Champion and support the Internet as a unique and valuable global resource.
- Ensure national and international (e.g. United Nations, European Union, African Union, G20, G7, Arab League, OECD) policies and sanctions regimes do not restrict the operations of telecommunications services that support access to the Internet.
- Encourage businesses and organizations that support Internet infrastructure to avoid decisions to exit countries for political reasons.
- Conduct Internet impact assessments to ensure national and international policies do not hinder the open, globally connected, secure and trustworthy Internet.

