

4G or Not 4G, That is the Question

By Reg P. Wydeven
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As most people know, I'm not too technologically savvy. My cell phone isn't much more advanced than the old "car phones" that were about the size of a brick. My buddies have phones with Internet access. Using these smart phones, it takes them about 30 seconds to settle bets, such as the movie role Tom Selleck turned down to play Magnum P.I. (it was Indiana Jones in 'Raiders of the Lost Ark' by the way).

My friends' phones have cool video games on them, such as 'Angry Birds.' Mine has 'Snakebite,' which was Avant-garde for the Apple II Plus in 1981. Their phones play music and movies while mine has an extendable antenna.

Even if I wanted to upgrade, I wouldn't know where to begin. When my buddies talk about the features their phones have, it's like they're speaking a foreign language. That's where the newly introduced Next Generation Wireless Disclosure Act may really help me out.

Introduced by Representative Anna Eshoo, a Democrat from Palo Alto, California, and the ranking member of the House Subcommittee on Communications and Technology, the Act would require wireless companies to disclose the specifications of their services.

Under the Act, wireless providers would be mandated to provide specific information about the speed, reliability, coverage zones, pricing, and the technology used for their service. They must also provide consumers with a side-by-side comparison of the speeds and prices of the top 10 competing networks. Eshoo likens the proposed new disclosure to a sticker on a new car, where the government requires dealers to divulge fuel economy and safety information.

One point of contention is the definition of a 4G network. The International Telecommunication Union, the global wireless standards-setting organization, defined 4G as a network capable of download speeds of 100 megabits per second (Mbps). At that speed, a high-definition movie could be downloaded in about three minutes.

Sprint Nextel, the first company to launch a 4G network, has download speeds of 3 Mbps to more than 10 Mbps. T-Mobile, the self-proclaimed proprietor of "America's largest 4G network," expanded its existing 3G network and called it 4G, and is capable of speeds of 5 Mbps to 12 Mbps. AT&T did the same thing and has similar speed. Finally, Verizon's 4G network also has speeds of 5 Mbps to 12 Mbps.

Therefore, none of the existing 4G networks can reach a fraction of the speed the ITU uses to define 4G. Accordingly, the telecommunication companies lobbied the ITU to revise its definition because so many wireless providers have been labeling "evolved 3G technologies" as 4G. The ITU agreed and declared 4G as "undefined."

To help the situation, the Next Generation Wireless Disclosure Act would require the wireless companies to work with the U.S. Federal Communications Commission to establish a minimum speed standard for 4G. The FCC would then set the speed range, which must be guaranteed by the carriers.

In support of the Act, Eshoo said, "Consumers deserve to know exactly what they're getting for their money when they sign-up for a 4G data plan." She elaborated, stating, "We need to enhance transparency and ensure consumers are fully informed before they commit to a long-term service contract."

FCC commissioner Michael Copps called the bill "common sense," claiming it "would arm consumers with exactly the kind of information they need to make smart choices for their mobile broadband service."

Despite the support, the bill faces strong opposition from the International Association for the Wireless Telecommunications Industry, a lobbying juggernaut. As soon as I figure it out, they'll be on 9G.

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