

Internet Browser Choice

We are normally used to access the Internet on our laptops or PCs through the Microsoft Windows Internet Explorer, which finds and displays information and websites on the Internet. This web browser generally comes together with the Microsoft Windows packages we purchase in order to operate our computers.

Earlier this year, the European Commission sent a statement of objections to Microsoft regarding competition concerns surrounding the bundling of its browser to the Windows operating system. According to the Commission, Microsoft exploited its dominant position in the operating systems market to hamper competition in the browsers market, by tying Internet Explorer to Windows.

In July, Microsoft made a proposal to address the Commission's competition concerns by offering to give genuine consumer choice in the browsers market. Microsoft has proposed that, in future, Windows will present owners of a new PC with a ballot screen in which they can select which browsers to install on their computer. Internet Explorer would be offered as one of a number of competing browsers.

This proposal follows on the Commission's insistence that Microsoft gives users of its Windows operating system the opportunity to choose between different Internet browsers after it reacted negatively to the modus operandi of Microsoft when it came to its web browser. The Commission has now welcomed Microsoft's proposal as it has the potential to give European consumers real choice over how they access and use the Internet.

Microsoft's proposal is expected to ensure that consumers could make a free and fully informed choice of web browser. Microsoft has in particular agreed to present users with a first screen explaining what web browsers are. Further, Microsoft would make available for five years a choice screen enabling users of particular Windows versions to choose which web browser(s) they want to install in addition to, or instead of Internet Explorer.

The Commission recently took Microsoft's proposal to the streets and has formally invited comments from consumers, software companies, computer manufacturers and other interested parties on the proposal submitted by Microsoft. The public consultation has started and is expected to last till 9 November.

Following this market test, Microsoft will be obliged to design Windows in a way that allows users to choose which competing web browser(s) instead of, or in addition to, Internet Explorer they want to install and which one they want to have as default.

The new remedy devised by the European Commission as a means to curtail the alleged tying is not without drawbacks of its own. For a start, it will be difficult for the

Commission to define the browsers eligible for being offered as an option to Internet Explorer. Secondly, there are currently not many around that can effectively compete. Indeed, at the moment the browser market is shared between Internet Explorer, Firefox, Safari, Google Chrome and Opera. Yet it is foreseen that when the browsers market will be freed, more competitors will interest themselves in the market.

In this way, the long-running battle with Microsoft over its Internet Explorer web browser could be resolved successfully by the end of this year, with consumers being at the receiving end of the benefits that the Commission's strategy will provide.

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