

Commercialization and Future Access to the Internet Highway

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Global Research, February 18, 2007

18 February 2007

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

“Perhaps the most obvious political effect of controlled news is the advantage it gives powerful people in getting their issues on the political agenda and defining those issues in ways likely to influence their resolution.”W. Lance Bennett

“The Bush majority on the FCC has bowed to the interests of the big cable and telephone companies to strip away, or undo, the Internet’s basic DNA of openness and non-discrimination.”Bill Moyers,

American Telegraph neutrality law;

“...messages received from any individual, company, or corporation, or from any telegraph lines connecting with this line at either of its termini, shall be impartially transmitted in the order of their reception, excepting that the dispatches of the government shall have priority.”

—An act to facilitate communication between the Atlantic and Pacific states by electric telegraph., June 16, 1860

On January 3, 2007, the New York Times ran an editorial entitled “Protecting Internet Democracy”. What the Times was referring to, was the need to uphold the “principle of Net Neutrality”, the principle according to which Internet service providers (ISPs—essentially mega cable and telephone companies, such as AT&T, Verizon, Bell South, Comcast and other phone and cable giants which own physical infrastructures), should not be able to favor some users over others, because such a power would inevitably lead to censorship.

Indeed, what the giant telecommunications companies would like to obtain from politicians and from the five-person Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is the right to filter content and commercialize the Internet, using broadband lines, and to price-discriminate between users. They would like to obtain the right to charge websites to deliver their content to consumers and to give preferential service to favored clients by setting up special toll booths on the information superhighway. Their purpose is to be able to establish a two-tiered Internet system, with fast high fare lanes and slower lower fare lanes. Net-accessing users who pay hefty fees would have their Web pages delivered on the Internet in the current speedy fashion; other users who do not fork over a ton of cash to the service providers would be relegated to the slow lanes and would be placed at a big disadvantage. In such a system, the big Internet users would have access to exclusive deals and would become bigger, while the individuals, the creators, the innovators and the other small users would remain small or disappear. —Only the richest corporations would have access to the prime bandwidth opened by telecommunications corporations, while other smaller Internet

users would be left behind.

Mind you, Internet users already pay more depending on the volume of data they ask servers to carry, just as trucks pay higher license fees than cars on public highways. What the service providers would like to do is different: they would like to divide the Internet into many different speed lanes and charge a different fee for each lane. It would be as if a public highway were charging different fees depending on whether one car happens to be on the 50-mile lane, the 60-mile lane, the 70-mile lane, etc. It is easy to understand why such a system, if implemented in a quasi monopoly environment, would be a money-grabbing scheme.

These are the stakes for the Internet information superhighway. The welfare and freedom of hundreds of millions of Internet users are pitted against the financial interests of a few greedy and very rich Internet providers. Will the politicians side with the people and the principle of free speech and the spirit of anti-monopoly laws by passing a 'net neutrality law' enjoining the FCC to require cable and telephone companies to continue providing Web sites to Internet users on an equal and nondiscriminatory basis, —or, will they buckle under the pressure of the cable and phone lobbies, and allow the exploitation of the many by the few? Net neutrality laws for common Net carriers have been adopted in many countries, including the United Kingdom, South Korea, and Japan, but not yet in the United States. In non-democratic countries, such as in Communist China, governments have implemented a digital divide by establishing countrywide content filters.

To understand what is at stake here, we have to consider that the Internet has been an unprecedented technological innovation that has democratized access to unfiltered information worldwide and has allowed creative new content provider companies, like Google, Microsoft, Yahoo, eBay, Wikipedia and others, to start small and grow larger. Just reflect that there are more than 100 million WEB sites in the world today. Therefore, it is not surprising that governments and corporations alike are following this explosion of free information with some trepidation, but for different reasons.

The reason people must be vigilant and act appropriately is that, in the past, powerful money interests have succeeded in persuading distracted or venal politicians to pass bad laws that turn up to be very much against the public interest. For instance, probably one of the worst laws ever adopted in the U.S. was the 1996 Telecom Act, passed by a Republican Congress but signed by Democrat President Bill Clinton. This law has opened wide the door to media ownership concentration in the U.S. and placed American consumers at the mercy of a handful huge conglomerates, most of them far-right conservative Republicans, which exercise near complete monopoly power over local electronic information channels, such as radio, TV or cable services. The predictable effect of this law has been more ownership concentration, less competition, less choice for the consumers and higher prices for reduced services. In other words, this was a law designed to promote special economic interests at the expense of the general public good. The end result of the law is there for everyone to see today. Nearly all broadcast news in the U.S. originates from one of six huge media conglomerates: Viacom(CBS), General Electric's NBC, Time Warner (CNN), Disney (ABC), Fox News Corp, and Clear Channel Communications.

The principle that airwaves and cyberspace belong to all the people and are public property needs to be reaffirmed, as the above mentioned 1860 U.S. law establishing freedom of access to the big invention of the time, the telegraph. A law guaranteeing freedom of access

to the Internet is as much required as the law guaranteeing access to the telegraph one hundred and fifty years ago. A "tiered Internet" would be a terrible blow to consumer choice and to freedom of information. It should be opposed by all who value freedom and fairness.

In the future, democratic governments should consider favoring the creation of not-for-profit Internet service providers as they already exist in some large cities. Indeed, the Internet is a basic economic and social infrastructure and should be viewed as a public utility, on the same level as electricity and the telephone.

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