

The Campaign To Save The Internet. Will it remain Free and Open with Equal Access to All?

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The campaign has pushed the door open, now we all have to go through it and raise our voices louder than Comcast's lobbyists to save the people's internet.

The next four months are going to determine the future of the Internet. Will it remain free and open with equal access to all? There are powerful corporate interests that want to profit even more than they already do from the Internet at the expense of the public interest. But as a result of the public's work this week, we now have an opportunity to create the Internet we want.

We intend to make this a major focus of our work because the Internet is an essential tool for people to have access to information and to communicate with each other and it is central to our work. We want your advice and involvement; your creativity and activism. To win the Internet that can't discriminate is going to require solidarity across issues and unity in our demands.

Getting Our Issue On The FCC Agenda

Two weeks ago, a plan to remake the Internet into a 'pay to play' system, more like cable TV than like the Internet of today, was leaked. The reaction in the Internet advocacy community was furious. Hundreds of thousands of calls and emails went in to the FCC to oppose the proposed new rules. That wasn't working, so we decided to put aside our work and increase the pressure in partnership with Fight for the Future and other Internet advocacy groups.

On May 7, we started a "People's Firewall" encampment outside the FCC doors to protect the Internet from corporate corruption. The camp grew over the next 8 days and as more tents were set up, it became known as Occupy the FCC. During the occupation, many employees stopped by to voice support or gave us thumbs up on their way into the building. Drivers honked their horns as they passed by and even a police bike brigade stopped and chanted support with us.

It was an amazing week that moved the FCC towards restoring the Internet to its original status as a utility that serves the public. Although there have been important changes since the proposed new rules were leaked, the leadership in the agency is so deeply influenced by big telecom companies that they are still off track.

The media has given our encampment outside the FCC, combined with the online work of many groups, credit for moving the debate. [TIME Magazine](#) was the first big outlet to report what was happening:

“The Internet has become a [new public utility](#), many Net-neutrality advocates [argue](#), and should be treated as such. The nation’s largest cable and phone companies fiercely oppose that idea — fearing greater regulation — and are mobilizing their lobbyists and allies on Capitol Hill to push back.

“The FCC’s eighth-floor executive office has been thrown into chaos amid a mounting backlash that [shut down its phone lines](#) as a growing number of open-Internet advocates [camp out in front of their office](#).”

Then, the [Washington Post reported](#) that the FCC is listening to protesters on its doorstep. The Post clearly defined our position favoring reclassifying the Internet as a common carrier and reported how one of the five commissioners, Ajit Pai, had visited the encampment.

Shortly after that the chair of the Commission visited the encampment and talked with us for about 15 minutes. No doubt, part of Tom Wheeler’s goal was to relieve the pressure building around him and to show how he supports an open Internet. The conversation focused on how to achieve a open Internet with equal access for all. Wheeler supports a quick fix by making new rules, but these rules can be challenged or changed. We advocated for a long-term solution of reclassifying the Net as a common carrier so that the FCC can regulate it in the public’s interest and the people can hold the agency accountable for protecting net neutrality.

Chairman Tom Wheeler told us that his newest version of the proposed rule would be open to both approaches. This was a major shift from the leaked reports just a week earlier. In fact, his proposed rule on May 15 when the FCC held a public meeting included a request for comments on the correct solution: reclassifying the Internet as a common carrier, a public utility that serves all equally and allows open access to all of the Internet.

Chairman Wheeler also sharpened his comments on his desire for an open and equal Internet. His rhetoric was close to what we say, as the [New Republic](#) wrote reporting on the Open Meeting:

“Just [listening to Wheeler](#) today, you’d have thought he was the biggest Internet freedom activist in the country. ‘If telecoms try to divide haves and have-nots, we’ll use every power to stop it,’ he said at the meeting. ‘Privileging some network users in a manner that squeezes out smaller voices is unacceptable.’”

We were [also visited at the camp by Commissioner Mignon Clyburn](#), who is in her second term as an FCC Commissioner. At the Open Meeting, Clyburn, like Wheeler, applauded the citizen action around the issue and both specifically mentioned the encampment. [Clyburn has been a consistent advocate for a free and open Internet](#). On the day of the Open Meeting, she reiterated that view writing: “There is no doubt that preserving and maintaining a free and open Internet is fundamental to the core values of our democratic society, and I have an unwavering commitment to its independence.”

It took millions of emails, tens of thousands of phone calls and two dozen people camping outside the FCC to push to open the door to common carrier status for the Internet. As the [New Republic](#) reported – activists seemed to have done the incredible in putting net neutrality and reclassification as a public carrier back on the agenda. Having this on the table is a major achievement. Now we must take advantage of it.

Why We Risked Arrest During the Open Meeting

Despite a majority of the Commission visiting us at the encampment and showing respect for our actions, we were still compelled to take more action at the Open Meeting. Three of us stood up at the hearing to set the context for the rule making process and once again make our goals clear.

Kevin Zeese stood up first and spoke about the crisis of democratic legitimacy the country is currently facing because the people are ignored in favor of corporate interests. He argued that the commission, by failing to reclassify the Internet as a public utility, was part of this crisis in legitimacy. By caving into the interest of Comcast and other telecom companies, the FCC was putting their profits ahead of what is best for the country.

Margaret Flowers pointed out how the Internet was part of the public commons that it had been developed by public dollars and should remain part of the commons by reclassifying the Net as a common carrier. She also pointed out that the Internet was the forum for Freedom of Speech in the 21st Century and we did not want that diminished by corporate interests.

Ken Ashe of Veterans for Peace told the commissioners he swore an oath to defend and protect the Constitution from both internal and external threats; and that the actions of the Commission were a threat to the First Amendment and Freedom of Speech in the 21st Century. He pointed out that thousands had died to protect these freedoms and the vets would challenge the FCC if it sought to undermine them. When a police officer told him he could be arrested, Ashe said that "threats of arrest do not intimidate me."

All three of us were grabbed by the police and escorted from the room. None of us were arrested, we believe because over the course of a week of camping outside of the FCC the police and commissioners had developed respect for us. They knew we were serious about protecting the public interest. During the week, many FCC employees, including their security, showed support for our goal of an open and equal Internet. Every day we were outside the FCC passing out literature, holding signs and talking to employees. One of the materials we shared was a flier urging people to be whistleblowers and let the public know of undue corporate interest over the proceedings.

Next Steps In Our Campaign To Save The Internet

The progress we have made before the rule was announced is not enough. We still have to convince a majority of the commissioners to put the public interest first, reclassify the Internet as a common carrier and put Net Neutrality in the law. We believe this is a winnable conflict but it requires everyone who uses the Internet to demand common carrier classification.

Over the next four months we must all educate people about this issue and organize so we are mobilized and are taking action. Of course, we need to participate in the public comment process to let the FCC know through official channels that we want the Internet treated as a public utility that is regulated in the public interest. We hope to see a flood of public comments and will be helping people comment through [Popular Resistance](#).

We don't think that is enough. Our goal should be to develop a national consensus that changes the political culture of the country so that there is overwhelming support for the

view that the Internet is something that should operate as a public utility such as water and electricity. The role of Comcast and other telecoms should merely be to provide the wire to the web, but that is all. They should not be creating a system that serves the wealthiest corporations differently than it serves the people. It should be more like a library – everyone can take a book out, but nobody is able to reserve a better copy because of their wealth.

So, how do we change the political culture? What actions outside of the rulemaking process can we take to make the reality we want to see becomes an inevitable reality? How do we make it impossible for the FCC to ignore the will of the people on this essential First Amendment issue of the 21st Century?

We want your ideas. We know that the thinking of many are more powerful than the minds of a few. Since this is something that affects everyone, anyone with ideas should share them. Some of our questions: What can be done at FCC's around the country (there are 27 of them)? What can we do nationally together – on days of action? What can we do in Washington, DC? How do we best focus on the individuals involved? Should we focus on Members of Congress? The White House? Commissioners – especially the chair?

[Submit your ideas by putting a comment on this article, here.](#)

Not only do we want your suggestions, we encourage you to take autonomous action. We urge you to organize actions on your own, suggest actions and join actions. We truly believe this is an opportunity for people to step up and show leadership.

Keeping the Internet open with equal access for all is central to all our organizing. No matter what issue we work on, the Internet is essential for education, organizing and mobilizing people as well as developing national consensus around the critical issues of our times.

Take Action Now

Below is suggested language that you can copy and paste at the link below or edit to more fully reflect your views.

I urge you to scrap the rules proposed on May 15, 2014 and instead restore the principle of online nondiscrimination by reclassifying broadband as a telecommunications service and putting in place rules for real net neutrality.

The rules you have proposed would allow discrimination online. Telecom giants like Comcast, AT&T and Verizon would be able to pick winners and losers and discriminate against online content and applications. It would give them the ability to implement pay-for-priority schemes that would be a disaster for startups, nonprofits and everyday Internet users who cannot afford these unnecessary tolls.

You say you want an open Internet without tiers based on fees, but the court has made it clear you can ONLY accomplish that by reclassifying the Internet as a common carrier. This reclassification is consistent with what the Internet is: a public utility where people get on the Internet and can go anywhere they want, there is equality of access to all sites and all sites are treated equally. The law should reflect reality; and the rules should preserve not only an open Internet but one that is equal and does not discriminate. Put into place real net neutrality.

[Submit your comment to the FCC here.](#)

This article is produced by [Popular Resistance](#) in conjunction with [AlterNet](#). It is a weekly review of the activities of the resistance movement. [Sign up for the daily news digest of Popular Resistance, here.](#) Kevin Zeese, JD and Margaret Flowers, MD are organizers of [PopularResistance.org](#); they co-direct [It's Our Economy](#) and co-host [Clearing the FOG](#). Their twitters are [@KBZeese](#) and [MFlowers8](#).

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