

Digital Free Speech Prevails... FCC Vote Enshrines Net Neutrality Protections

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After millions made it clear they would not allow the commission, lawmakers or the telecom industry 'to mess with the Internet,' broad coalition plans celebrations on verge of historic vote.

The Federal Communications Commission on Thursday, in a 3-2 vote, approved the reclassification of the Internet under Title II of the Communications Act.

"Fast lanes will not divide the internet into haves and have-nots," announced FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler during remarks that followed the approval, which passed along party lines with Democrats voting for the change and the two Republican-appointed members dissenting.

"Consumers will be able to go where they want, when they want," Wheeler continued. "Today is a red letter day for internet freedom."

Though expected, the vote was greeted with cheers—applauded as "the biggest win for the public interest in the FCC's history"—from supporters of net neutrality, the concept that says online traffic should not be relegated to fast or slow lanes determined by the large telecom companies who control much of the nation's digital networks.

"We applaud Chairman Wheeler, Commissioner Rosenworcel and Commissioner Clyburn for voting for real Net Neutrality today," said Free Press executive director Craig Aaron after the vote. "They were willing to listen to the facts in the face of a fiercely dishonest industry lobbying effort. But this is really a victory for the millions and millions of people who expect the Internet to be an open engine for free speech and innovation."

Tiffiniy Cheng, co-founder of Fight for the Future called the fight for net neutrality and the Open Internet as the "free speech struggle in the digital age" as she welcomed the FCC decision and celebrated the coalition of groups that made it possible. "Institutions of power should know by now: Internet users will not stand idly by while anyone tries to take their freedom away. And when Internet users come together to fight for something they believe in, nothing can stop them."

Speaking on behalf of Color of Change, the advocacy group's executive director Rashad Robinson hailed the vote as a major civil rights victory. "Our ability to be heard, counted, and visible in this democracy now depends on an open Internet," explained Robinson, "because it allows voices and ideas to spread based on their quality—not the amount of money behind them. Without net neutrality, the voices of everyday people wouldn't have a chance."

In addition, Robinson scolded those "paid to carry water for the telecoms" who said that net neutrality wasn't a fight for communities of color or that the battle could not be won. Such voices, he said, "claimed that big telecom companies, and telecom-funded legacy civil rights groups like the National Action Network, Urban League, and NAACP, were too strong for us and our allies to face down. What they underestimated was the power of everyday people who used their voices

strategically, empowered by the open Internet. We urge members of Congress to show they are on the side of communities, and not corporations, by supporting the FCC's decision to implement the strongest net neutrality rules possible."

Following vote, Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) released the following statement:

The FCC has ensured that the Internet remains a place for the open exchange of ideas and information free of discrimination and corporate control. This is a victory for consumers and entrepreneurs.

Millions of Americans, including tens of thousands through my website, told the FCC loudly and clearly that Internet service providers should be a neutral gateway to everything on the Internet. Today's vote shows that ordinary Americans can make a difference when they stand up to powerful corporate interests and Washington lobbyists.

And the ACLU's Gabe Rottman called the move by the FCC a "plain and simple victory" for free speech rights.

"Americans use the internet not just to work and play, but to discuss politics and learn about the world around them," said Rottman. "The FCC has a critical role to play in protecting citizens' ability to see what they want and say what they want online, without interference. Title II provides the firmest possible foundation for such protections. We are still sifting through the full details of the new rules, but the main point is that the internet, the primary place where Americans exercise their right to free expression, remains open to all voices and points of view."

Tim Berners Lee, inventor of the world wide web system on which the Internet was originally built, addressed the meeting via video and applauded the FCC's rule changes.

"More than anything else, the action you take today will preserve the reality of a permission-less innovation that is the heart of the internet," Berners Lee told the commissioners. "It's about consumer rights, it's about free speech, it's about democracy."

Users were using the #netneutrality hashtag on Twitter to offer reactions to the day's historic vote:

Champions of the concept known as net neutrality—who have literally been counting the hours—are preparing celebrations on Thursday as the FCC is expected to officially enshrine the policy by reclassifying the Internet as a public utility—a decision that follows intense lobbying over recent months by grassroots organizations and web users who say the vote represents the most important ruling by the commission in a generation.

As Free Press, one of the groups that have led the charge to defend net neutrality by having the FCC place the Internet under what is known as Title II protection, tweeted early Thursday morning: "Today is THE day."

According to Craig Aaron, the executive director of Free Press, "After years of cronyism, corruption and cowardice, Thursday's vote for strong Net Neutrality rules at the FCC is unexpected if not unprecedented."

The FCC's meeting is scheduled for 10:30 AM EST, with the three Democratic members of the panel expected to approve the reclassification rules, overcoming the opposition of the two Republicans on the panel who have voiced their opposition.

What now appears like a victory, however, was not always assured. Digital activists, civil rights advocates, and others formed a large national (and international) coalition to force the FCC away from previous rules changes that would have betrayed the foundation on which the Internet was built, which is that all digital traffic should be treated equally by the Internet Service Providers (ISPs), which include the well-known cable giants such as Comcast, Time Warner, and AT&T.

As Evan Greer, a campaign manager for advocacy group Fight for the Future, told the Guardian on Thursday while he stood among other activists outside FCC headquarters in Washington, D.C.: "We need to send another signal that you can't mess with the internet."

According to Aaron, the real story behind the historic U-turns by both the Obama administration and the FCC on net neutrality is the "dozens of public interest groups, new civil rights leaders and netroots organizers coordinating actions online and off, inside and outside Washington."

In a post written just ahead of the FCC vote, Aaron credits "artists, musicians, faith leaders and legal scholars" who bolstered the efforts of grassroots voices and "about a dozen mostly unsung advocates in D.C." who helped the broader coalition as it "broke the FCC's website, jammed switchboards on Capitol Hill, and forged new alliances that are transforming how telecom and technology policy is made."

In an op-ed published on Thursday, Malkia Cyril, the founder and executive director of the Center for Media Justice, also praised the work of the diverse coalition which fought so hard to make reclassification a political possibility, and now, a reality.

"If the rumors are true," Cyril writes, "it looks like these activists, and the over 4 million people who advocated for strong net neutrality rules, might just get the protections they've been waiting for."

And, she continued:

The open internet is the first and only mass communications platform to allow under-served communities to bring injustices once in the shadows to light, and speak truth to power.

That's why if the FCC protects internet users with strong network neutrality rules this week, I will be among those clapping and crying for joy. Though the struggle for equal communication rights and access is far from done, an open internet gives those without traditional power the tools to plead our own cause - and that is something worth fighting for.

As Matt Wood and Candace Clement of Free Press explained earlier this month, there's a reason that Thursday's vote by the FCC is, colloquially-speaking, "the biggest deal ever." They explained:

Title II doesn't just restore the principles of nondiscrimination that have served as the bedrock of two-way telecommunications policy in the U.S. It also gives the FCC the authority it needs to preserve universal and affordable access, competition and consumer protections for broadband users. Like Net Neutrality, these foundational principles are at the core of our communications needs for the next century and beyond.

With Title II we have the legal authority we need to win the battles that are coming around the bend. Folks in Congress who are in the pocket of ISPs will try to tear this victory down. ISPs will search for ways to skirt the law — and they'll sue to overturn it. But we'll stand on the strongest legal footing possible to win in Congress and in the courts.

If the FCC votes to reclassify under Title II, it will be one of the greatest public policy victories in decades — because it's not a defensive move. Title II is the law the FCC should have applied all along, and reclassification is a proactive push to protect the rights of Internet users at a time when companies like AT&T, Comcast and Verizon are trying to control the market and strengthen their monopoly status.

A Title II win will prove that organized people can trump organized dollars — and that industry's half-assed attempts to co-opt grassroots language are no match for the innovative tactics of true Net Neutrality activists.

CC applies.

<http://tinyurl.com/pa99mgr>

Jungle Drum Prose/Poetry. <http://jungledrum.lingama.net/news/story-1490.html>