

US House votes to repeal internet protections

Trump expected to sign anti-privacy measure into law

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Following passage by the Senate last week, the US House of Representatives voted 215-205 on Tuesday in favor of a joint resolution to overturn privacy regulations established by the Federal Communications Commission which bar broadband internet access services from gathering data about the online activity of consumers and selling it. The House vote sends the legislation to President Donald Trump who is expected to sign it into law.

The repealed FCC regulations were adopted last October 27 and scheduled to take effect at the end of this year. The rules specified that broadband providers such as Comcast, Verizon and AT&T were required to obtain consumer approval via an “opt-in” procedure before they could collect a multitude of customer data and sell it to marketing organizations or use it to sell advertising.

With the vote on the resolution split along party lines, the Republican-controlled House adopted entirely the position of the broadband industry that claimed they were being unfairly treated by the Obama-era regulations. They argued that internet access providers were at a market disadvantage in comparison to newer tech industry companies like Google and Facebook, which are not under FCC jurisdiction and face less oversight and regulation of their consumer data collection practices.

There is no doubt that significant business interests were behind the congressional repeal. A battle has been underway for over the past decade between first-wave internet “on-ramp” technology companies and second-wave internet search and social network providers over advertising and Wall Street investment dollars.

Corporate advertising money is moving away from

traditional media channels such as print, radio and TV and into the targeted and measured marketing campaigns of search engines and social networks. Clearly, the firms that own the pipes of the internet have direct access to the flow of information across their infrastructure and recognize that the ability to store, analyze and sell this information is a means of increasing their access to tens of billions of dollars in advertising revenue.

The congressional debate over the resolution included the absurd spectacle of Trump’s FCC Chairman Ajit Pai claiming that the measure was in fact a “step toward restoring consumer privacy protections that apply consistently to all internet companies.” Meanwhile, the House Democratic Party leadership response was predictable in the face of the Republicans assault. Minority leader Nancy Pelosi included in her remarks that the measure would make Americans more vulnerable to email hacking by “agents of Russian intelligence,” claims that have yet to be substantiated with any proof.

In passing the explicitly anti-democratic joint resolution, both the House of Representatives and the Senate have gone on record as allowing the privacy rights of American citizens to be permanently undermined by the business practices of a small number of giant technology corporations. In effect, Congress has declared the information that individuals reveal while browsing, shopping or communicating over the internet belongs to the corporations that supply online access, not to the consumers themselves.

As the former chairman of the FCC, Tom Wheeler, wrote in the *New York Times* on Wednesday, “The bill not only gives cable companies and wireless providers

free rein to do what they like with your browsing history, shopping habits, your location and other information gleaned from your online activity, but it would also prevent the Federal Communications Commission from ever again establishing similar consumer privacy protections.”

Information and data security experts have also drawn the conclusion that the law will enable more unconstitutional mass government surveillance and lead to a further expansion of attacks on democratic rights. While companies such as Apple and Google have so far publicly claimed that they are opposed to allowing unfettered government access to the private data of their customers—for entirely pragmatic business reasons—companies like Verizon and AT&T have a long history of collaboration with the police and surveillance agencies of the US government.



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