

Trump's FCC chairman issues plan to overturn 2015 "net neutrality" rules

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The Trump administration's Federal Communications Commission (FCC) chairman, Ajit Pai, released a draft proposal on Thursday for overturning net neutrality regulations that the agency adopted in 2015. Net neutrality is the principle that the transmission of data over the Internet must be treated equally, without regard to content, purpose or originating source.

Under the terms of the 2015 Obama-era FCC "Open Internet Order," companies that own the infrastructure and provide broadband Internet cable and wireless services cannot slow, block or prioritize online content. Additionally, they cannot provide faster delivery of content from companies that are willing to pay more for it.

In its notice of rule changes, entitled "Restoring Internet Freedom," the FCC draft proposal calls for an end to the 2015 "regulatory approach that gives government control of the Internet and to restore the market-based policies necessary to preserve the future of Internet Freedom ..." For the Trump administration, a "free and open Internet" is synonymous with removing any restrictions on corporations and has nothing to do with the access and privacy issues confronting the public.

At the heart of the draft proposal is elimination of what is known as Title II public utility-style regulation of broadband Internet Service Providers (ISPs). Under Title II rules, telecommunications giants like Verizon, AT&T, Time Warner, Charter/Spectrum and Comcast are regulated as "common carrier services." This means that their policies and practices are subject to FCC review based on "just and reasonable" and "public good" considerations.

The FCC's new draft proposal is the antithesis of such considerations and amounts to a brief for the

telecom monopolies that control more than three-quarters of all Internet connections in the United States. Through their mouthpiece, Ajit Pai, the corporations that control public access to information are planning to "throttle" Internet content, increase monthly service fees, sell consumer data and engage in the content creation business as they see fit.

By attacking the Title II framework of the 2015 regulations, the Republican-controlled FCC is exploiting the contradiction between the regulatory framework of the US government and the vast expansion of the Internet and telecommunications infrastructure over the past 25 years. Title II dates back to the 1930s and the Roosevelt era, and is based on the land-line telephone technology of that period.

With the convergence of the content and delivery systems of the Internet—embodied in the emergence of companies like Netflix, Apple, Google and Amazon—as well as the merger of cable companies like Comcast and AT&T with media organizations like NBC and CNN, there is ferocious corporate competition for control of both digital content and streaming delivery, as both are displacing the traditional broadcast and cable television models.

Another aspect of FCC chairman Pai's plan calls for the transfer of policing of telecom industry privacy practices from the FCC to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), a move widely recognized as essentially ending oversight. Net neutrality experts have pointed out that enforcement and prevention of privacy violations without FCC oversight is an absurdity, since the FTC regime pursues criminal activity only after it has already occurred.

In preparation for the release of the FCC draft, Pai gave a speech on Wednesday at the Newseum in Washington, DC, where he unabashedly spoke as a

representative of telecom corporate interests. Pai resorted to McCarthyite-style accusations by claiming that the 2015 framework—in fact, a very weak set of government regulations—was based on a plan “to get rid of the media capitalists in the phone and cable companies and to divest them from control.”

Kevin Werbach, an expert on Internet issues from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, responded, telling *Fortune*, “Pai is clearly trying to throw some red meat to the right-wing base in order to counter the broad popular support for open Internet protections... That’s not the job for the head of an independent administrative agency.”

The attack on net neutrality comes on the heels of the passage by Congress of a joint resolution ending restrictions on the ability of ISPs to sell consumer privacy data to marketing companies. These measures are further evidence that the American government—the Trump administration and the Democrats as well as Republicans—is committed to removing any restriction on the profitmaking endeavors of the banks, corporations and wealthy elite and returning society to conditions that existed prior to the 1930s.



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