

Net neutrality and the drive to censor the internet

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Wednesday's move by the Trump administration to end net neutrality marks a milestone in the offensive by the US government and major corporations to put an end to the free and open internet, paving the way for widespread government censorship of oppositional news and analysis.

Under the current law, upheld by numerous court decisions and reaffirmed by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in 2015, companies that provide internet access to users, known as internet service providers (ISPs), cannot block or impede their users' access to any website or service.

But the draft proposal published by FCC chairman Ajit Pai Wednesday, and expected to sail through the approval process next month, would put an end to the decades-long treatment of internet services as a public utility, allowing the internet monopolies Comcast, Charter, AT&T and Verizon full ability to block, throttle and promote internet traffic at will.

This will allow them to block or limit access to websites, such as the *World Socialist Web Site*, WikiLeaks and other sources of politically critical news, entirely at their discretion, as well as peer-to-peer file sharing networks, which were used by news outlets to bypass censorship in the past.

The ending of net neutrality will also have a substantial economic impact. By scrapping most government regulation of the internet giants, the ISPs will be able to use their monopoly power to jack up prices for consumers. While most people will be relegated to a slow and largely censored internet, the ability to communicate information freely will be reserved for those who can pay exorbitant premium rates.

Moreover, by forcing content providers to pay for premium access, the ending of net neutrality threatens

to massively entrench existing communications monopolies, while restricting access to smaller businesses and user-supported sites and services, which will not have the financial resources to compete with the technology and media giants. ISPs will be free to increase costs for smaller sites and services, potentially driving them out of business.

Major media outlets, which have for years been inveighing against the independent blogs, websites and other news outlets that gained readership at their expense, will no doubt seek to use the ruling to bring to bear their economic leverage to regain their former control over the political discourse.

The power that is being handed to a few corporations is staggering. The four largest telecommunications companies control more than 75 percent of high-speed internet service. More than half of American households have only one ISP to choose from, and most other households have only two providers to choose from.

Now, these giant monopolies, which have already demonstrated that they act as proxies for the government by collaborating in the NSA's illegal mass surveillance programs, will be able to block access to entire websites.

While the major social media and content distribution companies, including Facebook and Google, have claimed to oppose the move, they do so entirely from the standpoint that ending net neutrality will give internet service providers greater power to compete with their businesses.

Facebook, Twitter, and Google, which owns YouTube, have made clear that they fully support internet censorship, which is the essential content of the ending of net neutrality.

This week, Facebook announced that it would notify

users when they read content from accounts accused by US intelligence agencies of spreading “Russian propaganda,” creating a blacklist of outlets presenting critical sources of news and analysis.

This followed the announcement by Google executive Eric Schmidt that the company would “de-rank” RT, Sputnik and what it called “those kinds of sites,” in its search and news products. This is an open-ended statement of intent to censor not just Russia-connected news sites, but effectively all political opposition. Schmidt’s comments were a confirmation of statements by the *World Socialist Web Site* that Google is seeking to limit access to sites based on political criteria.

Google’s YouTube, meanwhile, has gone on a censorship spree, taking down videos and banning and demonetizing channels it claims are spreading “extremist” views.

The ending of net neutrality plays a key role in this censorship drive. Under conditions that existed prior to the ending of net neutrality, users were able to bypass these forms of heavy-handed censorship by turning to smaller and more open platforms to find and share information.

But with the ending of net neutrality, the social media and streaming monopolies will be able, by cutting deals with the ISPs, to strangle their upstart competitors, keeping users locked into platforms that increasingly serve as little more than distribution networks for state-approved propaganda.

Billions of people all over the world have embraced the internet precisely because it promised a free and unimpeded way to access and share information. Oppositional and socialist organizations, excluded for decades from the public discourse by the effective monopoly exercised by major newspapers, TV, and radio stations, found an audience hungry for information suppressed by the increasingly discredited establishment media.

The government’s lies—from the “weapons of mass destruction” that justified the invasion of Iraq, to government complicity with Islamist organizations it was supposedly fighting in the “war on terror,” to mass surveillance and the corrupt and oligarchic nature of American politics—have been exposed by internet publications.

Now, under conditions of a mounting war threat and soaring social inequality, public access to alternative

sources of information is seen as an intolerable threat, to be shut off and suppressed.

Internet communications are not a luxury, but a vital social need and should be treated as a public utility. However, under conditions in which three billionaires control as much wealth as half the US population, and all of social and economic life is controlled by a shrinking number of powerful corporations, all social rights, from communications to the most basic necessities of public infrastructure, are treated as privileges available only to the increasingly small sliver of the population that is able to pay for them.

The demand for the most basic social rights, including the freedom of the press and the freedom of speech, comes into conflict with the capitalist system.

The defense of a free and open internet is inseparably bound up with the struggle against capitalism, based on the independent and international mobilization of the working class around a socialist program.

The massive and bloated technology monopolies, who now see their primary function as being the blocking, not the dissemination, of information, must be seized and turned into publicly owned utilities, with the aim of providing the entire world’s combined knowledge to the whole global population.



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