

The end of net neutrality and the fight to defend the free internet

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The US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) voted Thursday to overturn rules, known as net neutrality, that required internet service providers (ISPs) to treat all data on the internet the same and prohibited them from limiting or blocking users' access to web sites and services.

The ruling heralds a new age in internet communications, where giant internet and technology monopolies like AT&T, Verizon and Comcast regulate what information people have access to.

Since the emergence of broadband internet, the Federal Communications Commission had *de facto* operated under net neutrality principles, including a 2005 declaration that “consumers are entitled to access the lawful Internet content of their choice” and that “consumers are entitled to run applications and services of their choice.”

In 2015, the FCC formalized these rules, classifying broadband access as a “telecommunications service” and declaring that “A person engaged in the provision of broadband Internet access service... shall not block lawful content, applications, services, or non-harmful devices,” and that ISPs “shall not impair or degrade lawful Internet traffic on the basis of Internet content.”

Thursday's ruling eliminates these so-called “bright-line” rules against censorship and sends a clear message to internet service providers that they are free to “block” and “degrade” the distribution of internet content at will.

It is difficult to overstate the momentous implications of the ruling. It allows a small cabal of home internet service providers and mobile data carriers to operate a blacklist of oppositional web sites and services, effectively blocking access to them for nearly all Americans.

In Thursday's hearing, FCC officials light-mindedly

downplayed such a scenario, declaring that the laws of the free market would not allow egregious blacklisting, and that customers could simply switch services if ISPs engaged in censorship. Their specious and self-interested arguments ignored the fact that, for most Americans, internet service is not a free market, with 50 million having only one broadband provider to choose from, and most of the rest having only two.

Just as ominously, the ending of net neutrality opens a new era of class discrimination. As the internet monopolies raise rates, they will introduce multiple tiers of service, with most users forced, through economic pressure, into service plans offering only highly restricted content. The free and open exchange of ideas, to the extent that it exists, will be the exclusive purview of the rich.

The ending of net neutrality is of a piece with the entire policy of the Trump administration, which has moved to immensely strengthen the power of the corporate and financial oligarchy through deregulation, tax cuts and other right-wing measures.

While some Democrats have postured as defenders of net neutrality, the Democratic Party has been at the forefront of the attack on freedom of expression on the internet. FCC Chairman Ajit Pai, who is leading the offensive against net neutrality, was first appointed to the FCC board by President Obama. The NSA and CIA, with the support of both Democrats and Republicans, have worked with the giant ISPs to monitor the communications and internet activity of individuals all over the world.

Moreover, the Democrats, together with the *New York Times* and Jeff Bezos's *Washington Post* and the major broadcast TV networks, are spearheading a campaign against freedom of expression on the internet, under the pretense of fighting “fake news” and foreign

“meddling.”

Facebook, YouTube and Twitter have hired tens of thousands of censors to ban and block “offensive” and “fake” content, while Google, the world’s largest search engine, initiated changes to its search algorithm to block left-wing web sites, principally the *World Socialist Web Site*, from appearing in tens of thousands of key search results.

The Democrats’ nominal opposition to the moves to end net neutrality are in large part bound up with the interests of the giant internet companies like Google and Facebook, which are concerned they may have to pay ISPs for premium speeds. However, these companies have shown that they are perfectly willing to forge deals with the ISPs when it is in their interests.

In 2010, Google worked with Verizon on a deal to privilege its own content (including from Google-owned YouTube), which it can now do with the abolition of net neutrality. Such an arrangement would feed on Google’s own efforts to censor the internet through the manipulation of its search results.

In the new age of censorship, the economic interests of the major corporations and the political aims of social reaction increasingly become one and the same. The leading advocates of censorship have been the major newspapers and TV broadcasters, who have seen a massive decline in readers and viewers as users have sought alternatives to their banal state-sponsored propaganda. The media conglomerates see in internet censorship not only a means to claw back market share, but to regain control of the political narrative, which they have lost to internet publications.

The ending of net neutrality has provoked widespread opposition among workers and young people. This opposition, driven by fears of what is to come, will solidify into social protest once the reality of censorship makes itself felt.

In the struggles ahead, one thing must be made clear: Censorship is the inevitable outgrowth of the capitalist system, which sets as its goal not freedom, but domination. It is the corollary of unprecedented social inequality and the drive of the ruling class toward world war.

The fight to defend the free and open internet is the fight to abolish the domination of the corporate and financial oligarchy over society and politics. The telecommunications monopolies, along with the giant

banks and corporations, must be turned into public utilities, run on the basis of social need, not private profit. Internet access is a basic social right, which must be freely available to all, without the interference of corporations or the state.

The social force capable of defending a free internet is the working class. The basic aim of internet censorship is to prevent or suppress the emergence of working class opposition to the policies of the oligarchy. Opposition to the imposition of corporate-state control must be connected to the fight against social inequality, poverty, unemployment and war.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has been the first to ring the alarm over Google’s censorship of the internet. It will continue to be at the forefront of the fight for freedom of expression on the internet, which is inseparable from the struggle to end capitalism and replace it with socialism.



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