

The end of net neutrality: The US ruling elite escalates campaign of internet censorship

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Net neutrality, the legal requirement that internet service providers (ISPs) treat all communications as equal, officially ended on Monday. The move is a major milestone in the attack on a free and open internet and on freedom of expression in the United States.

Since the birth of the public internet, ISPs have operated as so-called “common carriers” and have been effectively regulated as public utilities, similar to bus companies and package delivery services. Until now, they were, by law, prohibited from discriminating against their users or websites by blocking, tampering with or slowing down internet traffic.

In 2015, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) reaffirmed these principles, declaring, “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.”

With the FCC’s vote to end net neutrality in December, which went into effect Monday, ISPs have been given sweeping powers to act as gatekeepers to the internet. Under the new rules, these giant private companies will have the ability to privilege some content over other content, establish packages that allow access to only certain sites based on what consumers pay, or block websites and services altogether.

The proponents of abolishing net neutrality, led by FCC Chairman Ajit Pai, argue that the vast powers granted to ISPs are irrelevant because users will be free to switch ISPs if they are not satisfied with the actions of their current provider. This argument is so absurd that it hardly merits refutation.

The internet service market is cornered by just four

corporations (Comcast, AT&T, Time Warner and Verizon). Fifty million Americans have access to only one internet service provider, and more than half have only two to choose from. This number will contract even further with the potential merger of AT&T and Time Warner, which is slated for approval sometime this week.

The ending of net neutrality has been met with overwhelming popular opposition. According to a poll by the University of Maryland’s Program for Public Consultation, 83 percent of American voters opposed the FCC’s move to end net neutrality. When the FCC opened the measure for public comment, 98.5 percent of individual respondents were hostile.

Despite this overwhelming public opposition, the ending of net neutrality on Monday was met largely with silence on the part of the Democrats and their aligned media outlets, and the implementation of this sweeping attack on democratic rights was not even mentioned on the evening news. As with everything else in America, popular opinion in the end counts for nothing.

No credence can be given to the professions of support for net neutrality on the part of the Democratic Party and among technology giants such as Google and Facebook. In fact, the Democrats and social media companies have been at the forefront of the drive to censor the internet.

Over the past year, Google and the social media monopolies Facebook and Twitter have moved to implement a regime of internet censorship at the behest of the US intelligence agencies, for which the Democrats have served as the mouthpieces. The companies have worked to substantially diminish the readership of left-wing, anti-war and socialist websites—including the *World Socialist Web Site*—in

the name of fighting “fake news” and “Russian meddling.”

The social media companies, meanwhile, base their nominal opposition to the ending of net neutrality on purely mercenary motives. They do not want their potential rivals among the ISPs to gain an advantage by promoting their own content distribution services. Just as importantly, they want to maintain their monopoly on censorship so that they can do the bidding of the US government in exchange for lucrative Pentagon contracts.

The Democrats’ token opposition measures, consisting of symbolic congressional votes, appeals for states to enforce net neutrality and a slew of legal challenges, serve as a political cover for their agreement with, and implementation of, internet censorship.

The ending of net neutrality marks a new stage in the drive to censor the internet. With the vast majority of written communication—and an ever-growing section of all communication—taking place online, the drive to censor and control the internet is a major step toward abolition of the freedom of expression in the United States.

This is not the outcome merely of a change in administrations. It is part of a shift in the class policy of the ruling elite. The 2016 election, with its broad abstention by the working class amid widespread hostility to Hillary Clinton, the favored candidate of Wall Street, and the subsequent strike movement by teachers independently of the unions, has made clear to the ruling elite that the imposition of internet censorship is necessary for the defense of its domination of society.

More broadly, the ruling is an expression of the growing monopolization of the American economy by a small number of massive corporations. This process is inseparable from the growth of social inequality and the attack on democratic rights. Despite the lionization of the “free market” by Democrats and Republicans alike, both parties are determined to impose a ruthless crackdown on any opposition to the handful of banks and corporations that increasingly dominate society.

The control over the internet by a handful of social media monopolies and internet service providers, which conspire against the democratic rights of the population, makes clear that the defense of democratic

rights is inseparable from the ending of private ownership of the internet infrastructure. Internet access is a basic social right, which must be freely available to all without the interference of corporations or the state.

The defense of internet freedom and opposition to censorship must be connected to a socialist program for the transformation of all major corporations into public utilities under the democratic control of the working class.

The social force capable of defending a free internet is the working class. The struggle of workers all over the world to defend their basic economic rights is intersecting with the struggle to defend freedom of expression. The cutting edge of this struggle is the fight against internet censorship.



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