

Free People Need Free Information

I use the internet to navigate information through triangulation, comparing and contrasting sources to arrive at a better understanding of history and current events. By following threads on wikis and blogs, I can pick up facts, pass by opinions, and occasionally arrive at conclusions I had not even considered when I began researching a topic. The power of a free and open internet is that ideas and information can exist on a fairly level playing field. It's just as easy to click on a link for a major news source as it is to click on a link for an independent news source. In fact, I often encounter a news story by catching a snippet of news being covered by a major media outlet and then researching an element of the story to learn more about the issue. The internet is invaluable for comparing several sources at one time and for digging up background information. I am concerned that tiered internet service will make it more difficult to access sites that are not highly sophisticated or corporate-sponsored. I believe that any bias in internet service will compromise public access to alternative information and put America on a slippery slope to an internet mediated by corporate interests.

The monopolization of media outlets permitted in large part by the Republican-controlled congress in the early 1990s shows beyond any doubt how important it is for government to safeguard public access to diverse, free-flowing information. There can be no doubt that corporations have an innate interest in controlling information; information has the power to shape society and society is ultimately where profits are gained or lost. Information's ability to influence everything from voting patterns to consumer habits has made Google, for example, one of the most powerful companies in the world today. In the last five years, Google itself has transformed from a search-engine to a multi-faceted interactive advertising superpower. Before Google went into the advertising business, a Google search would yield matching results presented in descending order of relevance. Today, however, the first few results that pop up are often listed not in order of usefulness, but according to the amount a site has paid to have its link prominently displayed. Hence, Google is a poignant example of how information resources on the internet could be mired in advertising and business interests over the next few years, or potentially crowded out altogether by commercial material. Tiered internet access would only exacerbate the potential for corporate media to crowd out independent sites.

More ominously, over the past decade it has become appallingly clear how much damage government complicity in the corporate seizure of media has done to our democracy. The media bias that results when corporate interests prevent journalists from reporting crucial, objective information to the public cripples our nation's ability to properly examine and debate everything from events and ideas to trends and policies. This bias undoubtedly stems from the fact that most news organizations today are owned by corporations that owe allegiance to legislators, who, in return, continually bend anti-trust laws to allow these enormous conglomerates to monopolize markets and information. This cycle not only inhibits the free exchange of ideas through media outlets but increasingly results in

misinformation that benefits the legislators and their allied corporations. Since the early 1990s when the Republican-controlled congress permitted several key mergers to take place between media corporations, Republicans have reaped the benefit of a distinct bias in their favor at major mainstream media outlets. since the advent of these mergers, America has experienced one of the most corrupt and least competent periods in government to date. The public had been largely misinformed about the state of the environment, foreign policy, education, national security, and the economy largely because the reciprocal relationship between politicians and large media corporations has impeded journalists in reporting critical information.

The bottom line is that corporations exist to make a profit and making a profit often requires unscrupulous trade-offs that exploit and manipulate whatever can be exploited and manipulated. The nature of doing business in the twenty-first century's highly competitive market requires maneuvering that almost necessarily leads to conflicts of interest where information is concerned. Thus corporations cannot be trusted to protect the public's right to a free and unmediated flow of information. The government, as an extension of the people's will, acting in the best interest of the American public must keep the internet free and open so that people around the country can have access to a wide range of information resources that can be compared, contrasted, and cross-referenced to mitigate distortions.