

To Chairman Genachowski and whomever this may concern at the FCC,

Time for FCC to reclassify broadband to ensure Internet remains a democratic medium

The Federal Communications Commission has the power to ensure the Internet remains accessible and open to consumers, writes guest columnist Timothy Karr. It need only reverse a series of Bush-era decisions that shielded broadband providers from FCC oversight. The FCC should "reclassify" broadband as a telecommunications service so it can promote broadband access and protect consumers.

FCC offers Internet workshop

The FCC will be holding an open Internet workshop in Seattle at 9:30 a.m. Wednesday in the Jackson Federal Building. For more information go to: <http://www.-openinternet.gov/workshops/>
TO be or not to be? That is the question weighing heavily on the Federal Communications Commission officials who visit Seattle this week for a public workshop on the future of the Internet and their agency's role in it.

There will be much to discuss. Earlier this month, a federal court ruled that the FCC lacked the authority to protect users' unfettered access to the most important communications medium of the 21st century.

The ruling caught the FCC in a regulatory limbo. The agency is now trying to sort out its authority to stop companies like AT&T, Comcast and Verizon from "managing" the Web in ways that undermine the openness that has made it so user-friendly.

But it doesn't end there. The court decision also threatens efforts to extend broadband's reach to people without a connection. The FCC's National Broadband Plan, which was created as part of President Obama's economic-stimulus package, was designed to make high-speed Internet access an onramp to opportunity for tens of millions of Americans who remain stuck offline. The ruling undermines almost every step the FCC hoped to take to bridge this gaping divide.

This disconnect is being felt in rural corners of Clallam and Whitman counties, says Nena Walton, the spokeswoman for NoaNet, a middle-mile access network that has received funding to connect more Washington communities. But there are entire areas of the state where people can't find affordable service. "Without that broadband, they virtually have no ability to engage," Walton said. "With broadband, it removes a significant hurdle."

A toothless FCC has profound implications for America's international competitiveness, too. America,

once a global leader in technology, has slipped behind countries in Europe and Asia that have managed to wire rural and low-income communities, protect an open Internet, create competition among broadband providers, and deliver Internet services that are far faster and cheaper than what's available in the United States.

And getting more people connected could very well be the elixir we need to lift America beyond our "jobless recovery." A 2007 study by the Brookings Institution and MIT estimated that a one-digit increase in U.S. per-capita broadband penetration equates to an additional 300,000 jobs. If our broadband penetration were as high as a country like Denmark's, we could expect approximately 3 million additional U.S. jobs.

On Friday, FCC Commissioner Michael Copps ? a longtime champion of public-interest media ? said America's broadband Internet needs openness and innovation to thrive. "At the end of the day, you have to come to the conclusion that we have a public interest in how [the Internet] is used to inform and serve the American people."

Commissioner Copps is right about that. He's also right about the remedy. The FCC has the power to rescue itself from its current crisis. It can reverse a series of Bush-era decisions that shielded broadband providers from FCC oversight. Since then, countries like Germany, South Korea, France and Japan have run circles around us with the help of national broadband policies that foster competition and openness.

To get us on a similar track, the FCC simply needs to "reclassify" broadband as a telecommunications service, over which the commission has unchallenged authority to promote broadband access and to protect consumers.

Reclassifying broadband would unleash the full might of phone and cable company lobbyists and lawyers who have profited from the incumbents' near monopoly control over Internet access. But it's a fight that needs to happen right now.

As the Internet becomes the most democratic communications medium of our time, the FCC must evolve, too. The agency must ensure openness, guarantee competition and protect users from abuses of power in ways that benefit everyone, from the shores of Clallam County to the banks of the Potomac.

It's time to reclassify.