As an academic, the open Internet is integral not only to my own research, but also to my teaching (not to my mention my students' ability to access information freely). This is especially true as a scholar of mass media who engages in critical analysis of media texts and institutions, and as a citizen increasingly concerned with the control that media corporations hold over information in this country.
Take for example, the many charges against Comcast in recent years. In 2008, Comcast paid Philadelphia's homeless to fill seats at public FCC hearings on this very issue of Network Neutrality, an effort to prevent critics of the company and supporters of Net Neutrality from participating (http://www.mediabistro.com/fishbowlny/tv/homeless_comcast_will_pay_to_attend_fcc_hearings_78554.asp?c=rss). Or the fact that Comcast already interferes with their customer's online access, engaging in Internet "throttling" users of BitTorrent, even those using the service for legitimate purposes. (Although courts sided with Comcast, the FCC saw fit to challenge Comcast's actions in the name of consumers' rights). These are the actions of Comcast in an era of Network Neutrality. I shudder to think how the company will behave if such principles are eliminated.

Picture this hypothetical scenario in a nation without Network Neutrality principles. I'm working on a research project examining and critiquing the practices of corporate communication industries. One aspect of the project focuses on the corporate practices of Comcast and criticisms levied against them. As a Comcast subscriber, I go online to pursue my research. Oddly, I can't find any criticism of Comcast's practices, despite that they've been named the worst company in America (http://www.examiner.com/x-35275-DC-Headlines-Examiner~y2010m4d26-Comcast-wins-worst-company-in-America-award). It turns out that Comcast has impeded my access to the websites of activists, journalists, scholars and organizations that have been vocal critics of the company. The pages of Free Press.net, Robert McChesney, Reclaim the Media, Save the Internet etc. load slowly, if at all.

The most immediate problem in this hypothetical scenario is that it prevents me from doing research, which is in part what the state of Pennsylvania pays me to do. More importantly (and frighteningly), it effectively removes citizens from following and participating in debates surrounding corporate communication industries online. The most important and powerful voice, the voice of those who are most directly affected by media policy - citizens/consumers - goes unheard and just as crippling, uninformed. A company like Comcast might claim that they do not intend to restrict access to information under a Net Neutrality-less web. But if they're pushing out citizen voices from open forums even under Net Neutrality principles, one does not have to suspend disbelief to see how such corporations will act without Net Neutrality.

This is just one example. From a consumer standpoint, consider how a loss of Network Neutrality combined with an approved Comcast/NBC merger will affect Internet usage. Armed with the ability to do so, Comcast could easily slow or block access to competing news sites - ABC, CBS, CNN, FOX,

etc. It is not in Comcast's financial interest to allow their customers to access the sites and services of their competitors. One of the great assets of the Internet is that we can now gather more information from a wider variety of sources than ever before. This is unlikely if Net Neutrality is eliminated.

The same situation could play out in relation to other services: why for example wouldn't Comcast block or impede its customers' access to Google Voice or similar services that are direct competitors to Comcast's digital voice service? As these examples show, eliminating Net Neutrality in fundamentally undemocratic. It would limit the information that citizens can access, making them less informed. It would restrict their access and participation to online forums for expression, discussion and debate. Rather than exercising democratic freewill, consumers would be beholden to corporate interests, who in effect would decide what types of information, forums and services their customers could access, effectively limiting consumer freedom.

It should be fairly clear why the FCC must protect Net Neutrality, and why they must do so now. The last 30 years have seen so many of our communication media fall under the control of corporate rather than citizen interests. The number of independently owned newspapers continues to dwindle while local papers rely more and more upon centralized news services. Radio, once the exemplar of media localism, is now controlled by a handful of national corporations who have gobbled up local stations and filled the airwaves with syndicated talk show hosts and preselected playlists. There was a time that local radio reflected the unique culture of a community. Not so since the 1996 Telecommunications Act and ensuing consolidation of ownership. At many local TV stations, the only locally produced content is the daily news, while public access channels are also becoming extinct. In short, citizens have lost their ability to discuss, express, to participate in these media.

Along comes the Internet and turns all of us into radio broadcasters, publishers, videographers, and debaters, laying out before us access to an unfathomable amount of information, resources, services and opportunities to create, engage, discuss and participate. That's what the open Internet brings to the table. Eliminate Net Neutrality, and you can kiss the Internet as we know it goodbye.

During and since the 2008 Presidential campaign, Barack Obama pledged to protect Net Neutrality. Chairman Genachowski has also gone on record as saying he would work to protect Net Neutrality. It is however, concerning to know that the Chairman has recently been holding closed-door meetings with communication corporations on Network Neutrality. Comcast's victory in court was a blow to the FCC's pursuit of Net Neutrality policies. However, the Commission has the authority to reclassify broadband as a common carrier service, which as far as I can tell is the only way that the Commission can implement Net Neutrality principles at this juncture. It is absolutely imperative that the FCC follow through on this course of action. The Chairman proclaimed to protect consumers and

Net Neutrality - he and the other Commissioners must work to do so. Else, we will have lost everything that makes the Internet so unique and engaging as it falls into the hands of corporations who alre!

ady have a deplorable track record as far as public and consumer interests are concerned.

Network Neutrality Now.

Sincerely,

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