

# AT&T's Latest Tactic: Rewrite History

AT&T can't seem to get its story straight on Net Neutrality. For years, company spokespeople had claimed that the issue was a "solution in search of a problem."

Over the last week, they've unwittingly defined the problem and it is ... AT&T.

As recently as 2008, Jim Cicconi, AT&T's top lobbyist, painted threats to an open Internet as a non-issue, and certainly *not* something requiring intervention by the Federal Communications Commission. "I think people agree why the Internet is successful," [Cicconi said](#) at the time, adding that threats to openness were largely imaginary. "I don't think government can anticipate these kinds of technical problems. Right now, I think Net Neutrality is a solution in search of a problem."

Fast forward to September 2010, and Cicconi has become a poster child for the problems he once denied.

## Getting 'Prioritization' Wrong

Last week one of his deputies, Robert Quinn, [filed a letter](#) with the FCC claiming that the company's plans for implementing "[paid prioritization](#)"— or privileging delivery of certain Internet content for a price – would *not* undermine an open Internet.

AT&T even went so far as to [attack Free Press](#) for, in their words, being dogmatic in disputing this claim. By way of evidence, AT&T wrote the FCC that prioritization [is in keeping](#) with the Internet's fundamental openness – supported by the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), the international body that develops and promotes Internet standards.

But soon after AT&T made this claim, the IETF's chairman disputed it. "This characterization of the IETF standard and the use of the term 'paid prioritization' by AT&T is misleading," IETF Chairman Russ Housley [told the National Journal](#).

And Housley is not alone. Leading technologists at the [Open Technology Initiative](#) and [Center for Democracy & Technology](#) (along with a slew of [technology beat reporters](#)) have labeled AT&T efforts

to justify prioritization “misguided” and “misleading.”

### **Mixing Up Its Message**

From past statements, it seems that even AT&T disagrees with itself. Way back in 2009, [Cicconi said](#) that Internet “discrimination that impacts consumers negatively is something unreasonable.” He [later complained](#):

*[Net Neutrality] is an important reality check for government: You're pushed to achieve a Utopian end people have dreamed up, but that's not how government works. Government works to solve problems ... and nobody has made a convincing case that there is a problem here that needs the government to step in.*

So what's really happening here?

AT&T wants to slow down most Internet traffic so it can charge a few deep-pocketed companies for priority access. That is certainly something the IETF never envisioned and does not endorse, because it goes against the openness that has been central to the Internet's success.

AT&T calls this scheme paid prioritization. But their misleading definition of it is just another way to wiggle out of the non-discrimination principles that have powered the Internet for decades. Think about it. Cicconi has long claimed that Net Neutrality threats don't exist and therefore don't require government intervention. Now AT&T seeks to demolish Net Neutrality, but it has to downplay paid prioritization to square the circle.

In other words, instead of calling Net Neutrality “a solution in search of a problem,” now they're saying: “Problem? What problem?”

### **Doing the Right Thing**

This campaign of disinformation shows that network operators will say anything to get what they want – even if it includes misleading regulators about crucial Internet policy.

On Wednesday, Free Press joined with several other public interest groups to demand that AT&T lobbyists [retract inaccurate statements](#) made to the FCC about paid prioritization.

History should be AT&T's guide.

For two years, the company operated under Net Neutrality rules as a [condition of its merger](#) with Bell South. Under that agreement, AT&T said that it would not “provide or sell to Internet content, application, or service providers ... any service that privileges, degrades or prioritizes any packet ... based on its source, ownership or destination.”

Under these conditions, the company increased investment in new networks and grossed profits in the tens of billions of dollars – without prioritization.

So, Net Neutrality has never been a problem for AT&T. But AT&T is now a problem for Net Neutrality.

And that's precisely why the FCC needs to intervene.