

This Is How Comcast Is Astroturfing the Net Neutrality Issue



Getty Images

In February, the *Washington Post* published a story detailing Comcast's immense lobbying power in Washington—and how that might

lead to potential astroturfing (or masked, artificial grassroots support spurred on by lobbies or corporations) on the web for issues like its merger with Time Warner Cable.

"They've spread a lot of money around town to a lot of places, just for moments like this," said Craig Aaron, president of Free Press, a consumer advocacy group that opposes the Time Warner Cable merger. At a minimum, Comcast could encourage the deal's critics to sit out the debate, he said. "At best, they've got a whole network of people advocating for them."

Comcast "has worked with most of the major think tanks in town who are interested in communications issues," including the Aspen Institute, the Brookings Institution and the American Enterprise Institute, [Comcast spokesperson Sena] Fitzmaurice said, declining to provide further details.

A Net neutrality proposal—one that [Comcast publicly supports](#) and has been subject of protest and [mainstream media criticism](#) from those who believe the rules would slow innovation, limit speech and drive up the cost of access to the Internet—is [open for public comment](#).

And now, op-eds in favor of the [unpopular proposal](#) from Comcast-linked think tanks are appearing in major publications—from the Wall Street Journal to U.S News and World Report—without disclosing the institution's ties to Comcast.

Yesterday, a visiting fellow at one of those think tanks, the American Enterprise Institute's Richard Bennett, [wrote a story for leading tech website GigaOm](#) in favor of the FCC's new Net neutrality rules. Bennett did not reveal the Institute's relationship with Comcast at any point within the piece.

Comcast and its cable lobby partners spent [over \\$70 million in the last decade lobbying](#) for the new net neutrality rules that would [allow them to create a slow lane](#) on the web, charge more for tiered services, and artificially slow traffic to competitors.

When reached by phone, Bennett said that he had been writing about Net neutrality for a decade before joining the American Enterprise Institute.

AEI's only had a tech policy center for maybe a year," he said. "I think you're trying to connect dots that aren't there.

"The Institute has no official stance on the Net neutrality issue," he added.

But the Institute's most read stories on Net neutrality clearly favor the FCC's new plan for a regulated Internet. One, titled "[Time to give up the Net neutrality quest](#)" was reprinted in the *Wall Street Journal's* Opinion section.

Another, titled "Net neutrality is a bad idea that's run its course," was reprinted [on RealClearMarkets.com](#). Neither Bennett nor the publication discloses his employer's ties to Comcast in either piece, but both identify the American Enterprise Institute next to his byline.

Holly Yeager's story in the *Post* details Comcast's strategy of encouraging think tanks to write white papers—or published reports used to shape policy—in defense of the company's more controversial stances and actions.

"Shoe leather lobbying gets you only so far," Michael Meehan, president of VennSquared Communications, [told the Post](#). "Then it's think tanks that write white papers, and white papers are taken by shoe-leather lobbyists into the congressional offices."

One of Bennett's stories, "Net Neutrality advocates need to get their facts straight," says in its opening sentence that "The FCC's Net neutrality rules are based on the false premise that American broadband services are sub-standard compared to those in other countries."

That "false premise" is, in truth, not false at all. The United States [lags behind 13 other countries in Internet speed](#), placing below the likes of Switzerland, Latvia and Romania. Still, this story was reprinted in [U.S. News and World Report's Debate Club section](#) without reference to AEI's ties to the telecom industry.

Bennett says he does not know the Institute's ties to Comcast or how much money they have received from the telecom this year.