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WHY YOU SHOULD CARE ABOUT NET NEUTRALITY

It's not just about Network Neutrality. It's about power.

By **Siva Vaidhyanathan** on May 9, 2014

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Mark Wilson/Getty Images News

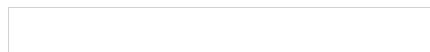
Executives for Comcast, Time Warner Cable and others are sworn into a hearing about the two companies' proposed merger at a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing.



Last week the *Wall Street Journal* broke a story that sparked all sorts of anger and consternation on talk radio, newspaper editorial pages, blogs, and online magazine sites like this one. After years of trying to forge rules that would ensure that Internet service providers -- cable companies, mostly --

treat all data traffic equally, the Federal Communication Commission surrendered.

Rules proposed by former cable executive and current FCC Chair Tom Wheeler would create a "fast lane" through which high quality, high-density data from popular and wealthy



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This blog is about politics, which, according to Aristotle, a truly veteran scribe, is the result of humans being the only herd animals capable of speaking to one another. It is written by Charles P. Pierce, a writer at large of Esquire magazine.

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sources like YouTube, Amazon, Apple, and Netflix would ride. The rest of the content that you seek -- blogs, recipes, pornography, and photos of cats -- would creep through the old "slow lane." That "slow lane" is what we currently call "The Internet." Wheeler's proposal would guarantee what the FCC calls "non-discrimination" and "non-blocking" (i.e. network neutrality) within each of these lanes of the Internet. But that's trivial in the long run.

The fact is that only established, well-funded firms would be able to transmit high quality video. And they would do so only after paying an extortion price to the cable providers. We might never hear of the next YouTube or the next Netflix because it would never be able to get big and rich enough to afford the toll. The rich would get richer -- especially Comcast.

All of this is unimportant if all you care about is that when you watch Orange is the New Black that the orange is brighter and the black is deeper than ever before. Under this proposed system you would pay more for your Amazon Prime or Netflix subscription. But that's not the worst thing.

It is important, however, if you value competition, innovation, and cultural democracy. It also matters, believe it or not, if you care about the concentration of power in America.

The FCC could ensure network neutrality if it would just reclassify cable broadband as a "telecommunication service." This seems wonky. And it is. If you received your data via telephone lines like you did until Napster came along and drove you to pay a cable company big money every month, you would engage in a neutral network. The phone system is classified as a "telecommunication service" so it is not allowed to favor signals from one origin over another. Cable services are under different rules. Mobile services are under still other rules. This stupid system is great for lobbyists but horrible for citizens. If the FCC chose boldly to represent us instead of cowering to the power of Comcast, it would just move some words around and solve the problem.

Instead, Wheeler has come up with more divisions and more complexity. Complexity is a corporate lobbyist's best friend. It's no coincidence that Comcast CEO Brian Roberts has endorsed Wheeler's proposal. It's great for Comcast. It could extort high fees from video services with the full backing of federal policy. And it could claim it supports neutrality for the rest of the content that crawls into our browsers.

Comcast is to this decade what Standard Oil was to the 1890s. It's a behemoth that controls and bullies many industries and exercises inordinate control in Washington, DC. It's already the cable and Internet provider for most of the country. In 2010 Comcast bought NBCUniversal and thus controls all of its channels and production -- including NBC News, MSNBC, and CNBC. It just signed a contract to control the Olympic broadcasts well into the 2030s.

And in February, Comcast moved to purchase Time-Warner Cable, giving it near monopoly control over New York City in addition to Boston, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC. It would give Comcast Los Angeles and San Diego in addition to San Francisco. The cultural and political power of Comcast would be formidable.

In 2012, Comcast ranked third among US corporations shoveling cash into political campaigns. It came right after Sheldon Adelson's Las Vegas Sands Corp., and the notorious Goldman Sachs. AT&T, another major Internet service provider, was fourth.



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The 75 Things Every Man Should Do

When you look at the Network Neutrality debate try to get beyond the "what does this mean for House of Cards?" question. Over time that won't mean much. What really matters is the kind of information ecosystem we need and deserve.

Siva Vaidhyanathan is the Robertson Professor of Media Studies at the University of Virginia and the author of "The Googlization of Everything (And Why We Should Worry).

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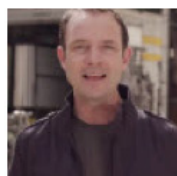
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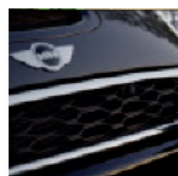
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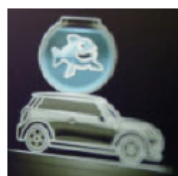
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[Add a comment](#)**William Bennett** · Top Commenter · Harvard University

"If the FCC chose boldly to represent us instead of cowering to the power of Comcast, it would just move some words around and solve the problem."

I fear you're operating under outmoded assumptions as to the nature of regulatory agencies here. In a proud oligarchy like ours these bodies are in no way answerable to or responsible to the public--what an absurd idea! Rather, the corporations are their "clients" and the agency is there to "service" them.

The other way to look at this correctly is to understand this "servicing" in the agricultural sense of the term. In that perspective the agencies are the ones getting serviced by the corporations and in turn servicing the public on the corporations' behalf.

Glad to have cleared that up for you.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 11 · May 9 at 5:41am

**Charley James** · Top Commenter

The FDA was an early example of this.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 3 · May 9 at 7:35am

**Peter D. Mikkelsen** · Top Commenter · Pasco, Washington

The Milton Friedman school of government in action. Forget that old JFK thing, never mind that fossil FDR and his New Deal. Teddy Roosevelt? HA! Anti-trust? what? Listen, ya just gotta trust that corporatocracy knows best. Welcome to the new world.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 5 · May 9 at 7:39am

**Jim Peale** · Top Commenter · Walter F. George School of Law, Mercer University

Absolutely. Besides that, how will FCC employees slide into high-paying jobs with ComCast if they don't take this opportunity to grease the skids?

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 1 · May 9 at 4:01pm

**Barry Friedman** · Top Commenter · University of Tulsa

Not even close to the worst aspect of this, but the FCC doesn't seem to mind advertising the fact that it has sold its soul. Spinelessness is the new black.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 11 · May 9 at 5:51am

**Peter D. Mikkelsen** · Top Commenter · Pasco, Washington

Wheeler responds: Au contraire, Monsieur Barrrrr... I have tres boldly moved to ensure the profit pool remains a private asset for my once and future kings, er, employers, er.... Free Enterprise! that's it, Free Enterprise! Corporations must be free! Because they are people, too! Freedom!

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 4 · May 9 at 7:31am

**David Nangle** · Top Commenter · Billerica Memorial High School

Well, I'm sure it will be nice to go outside, for a change. Hey, what's up with the weather?!

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 7 · May 9 at 5:37am

**Frank Armstrong** · Top Commenter · Portland, Oregon

Comcast is predicting weather will be in HD, if you can afford it.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 6 · May 9 at 8:11am

**James R. Filyaw** · Top Commenter · University of Tennessee, Knoxville

in case you missed it, the roberts supreme court has ruled that the only speech that matters is money (of which comcast has plenty).

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 6 · May 9 at 7:47am

**Frank Armstrong** · Top Commenter · Portland, Oregon

(nod to Lloyd Price)

Over and over
I gave my rights to you
Over and over
This is nothing new
Over and over
You take me for a fool
But over and over
I'll go to school on you

Cause you've got (net neutrality)

Blog (net neutrality)

Hope (net neutrality)

Website (net neutrality)

Art (net neutrality)... [See More](#)

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 3 · May 9 at 8:34am

**Judy Clay** · Top Commenter · Villanova University

Bravo, sir!

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · May 9 at 9:37am

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A Whole Lot More

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