

TAKING ACTION FOR MEDIA DEMOCRACY

I'm just one person. How can I make a difference?

The FCC leadership failed in its 2003 attempt to roll back media ownership rules. Why? Only because millions of Americans got organized and contacted the FCC and their elected officials, saying NO to more media monopoly. We can make a difference, and together we will make a difference. Here are several concrete steps you can take:

- **Submit comments to the FCC.**

Visit www.stopbigmedia.org and use the online form to tell the FCC: big media is big enough already. Then tell your friends and co-workers to do the same!

- **Talk to the FCC in person, in Seattle.**

Later this fall, FCC Commissioners will hold a **media ownership hearing in Seattle**, giving us a rare opportunity to tell them in person how locally-accountable media and independent media are important to our communities. Watch www.reclaimthedia.org for details!

- **Tell your Senators we need net neutrality!**

In Washington, Senator Maria Cantwell supports net neutrality, but Patty Murray is still **on the fence**. Call the capitol switchboard at 800.839.5276, ask for your Senator's office and tell her to **vote NO on HR. 5252**, the bad telecommunications bill.

- **Sign on to the Bill of Media Rights and stay informed!**

The **Bill of Media Rights (right)** is a strong, simple statement about the kind of media our democracy and culture need to stay healthy. **Sign on at www.reclaimthedia.org**, and you'll receive periodic email updates and opportunities to take action!

Based in Seattle since 2002, Reclaim the Media is a grassroots media democracy advocacy organization, and a cofounder of the Save the Internet and Stop Big Media coalitions. Intern Eva Holman contributed research and writing to this introduction.

RECLAIM THE MEDIA

PO Box 22754, Seattle, WA 98122 | 206.931.0565
mediademocracy@reclaimthedia.org
www.reclaimthedia.org

BILL OF MEDIA RIGHTS

The American public has a right to:

MEDIA THAT PROVIDE AN UNINHIBITED MARKETPLACE OF IDEAS

- Journalism that fully informs the public, acts as a government watchdog, and protects journalists who dissent from their employers.
- Newspapers, TV and radio stations, cable and satellite systems, and broadcast networks operated by multiple, diverse, and independent owners employing a diverse workforce.
- Radio and TV programming produced by independent creators that is original, challenging, controversial, and diverse.
- Programming, stories, and speech produced by communities and citizens.
- Internet service provided by multiple, independent providers who offer access to the entire internet over a broadband connection, with freedom to attach within the home any device to the net connection and run any application.
- Public broadcasting insulated from political and commercial interests that is well-funded and especially serves communities underserved by privately-owned broadcasters.
- Regulatory policies emphasizing media education and citizen empowerment, not government censorship, as the best ways to avoid unwanted content.

MEDIA THAT SERVE THE PUBLIC INTEREST

- Electoral and civic, children's, educational, independently produced, local and community programming, as well as programming that serves Americans with disabilities and underserved communities.
- Media that reflect the presence and voices of people of color, women, immigrants, Americans with disabilities, and other communities often underrepresented.
- Maximum access and opportunity to use the public airwaves and spectrum.
- Meaningful participation in government media policy, including disclosure of the ways broadcasters comply with their public interest obligations, ascertain their community's needs, and create programming to serve those needs.

MEDIA THAT REFLECT AND RESPOND TO THEIR LOCAL COMMUNITIES

- TV and radio stations that are locally owned and operated, reflective of and responsible to the diverse communities they serve, and able to respond quickly to local emergencies.
- Well-funded local public access channels and community radio, including low-power FM radio stations.
- Universal, affordable internet access for news, education, and government information, so that all citizens can better participate in our democracy and culture.
- Frequent, rigorous license and franchise renewal processes for local broadcasters and cable operators that meaningfully include the public.

Will we have

COMMUNICATIONS RIGHTS?

A great struggle for our free press and for our creative culture is happening right now.

OUR RIGHTS TO COMMUNICATE with one another, to share political ideas without fear of censorship, and to create and recreate our culture together, are the core of our free society. Those rights are spelled out in Article 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. In the US, our constitutional rights to free speech and freedom of the press are meant to ensure that we all benefit from what the Supreme Court has described as "an uninhibited marketplace of ideas in which truth will prevail." In this reciprocal "market," our right to see and hear other people's free speech is as essential to our democracy as our right to speak for ourselves.

AT ITS BEST, the media encourages and supports our free speech rights, giving us opportunities both to speak and to hear speech from a wide range of others. Recent developments in Internet and wireless technology have dramatically increased many people's (though not everyone's) access to self-publishing, broadcasting, and participation in large-scale public conversations.

UNFORTUNATELY, our elected officials, who we have entrusted to safeguard the openness of our media systems, often favor the private commercial interests of media megacorporations instead of serving public accountability and democratic communications values. This imbalance places America's democracy, culture, and economy at risk.

THIS FALL, our communications rights and our "uninhibited marketplace of ideas" are being threatened by two sets of proposed policy changes backed by a few wealthy media and communications corporations, and opposed by hundreds of public interest groups from across the political spectrum and millions of ordinary citizens. Senator Ted Stevens is pushing a **telecommunications bill** which, among other things, would wipe away the "net neutrality" protections which guarantee the Internet's role as a content-neutral level field of conversation. Meanwhile, FCC Chairman Kevin Martin will try (again) to weaken or abolish the **media ownership caps** which help protect diversity of opinion by guarding against information monopolies.

READ ON to find out more about the related issues of media ownership and net neutrality--and how we can take action to help protect our free speech, our culture, and our communications rights.



NET NEUTRALITY

What is "net neutrality?"

Net neutrality is the basic principle that Internet users, not service providers, should be in control of what they are able to view or download. Until now, the Internet has always worked according to this neutrality principle: all "bits" are created equal.

Net neutrality protects our free speech rights by making sure that the public can view the smallest blog just as easily as the largest corporate web site. It prevents powerful Internet companies like AT&T from rigging the playing field for only the highest-paying big business sites.

But Internet providers like AT&T, Verizon and Comcast are spending millions of dollars lobbying Congress to get rid of net neutrality. If Congress doesn't take action to implement meaningful net neutrality provisions, phone and cable behemoths will be able to squeeze the "tubes" through which our Internet flows, deciding what we can and can't see, at what speed, and at what premium cost. The free, open and competitive Internet we are used to will become a thing of the past.

Myths and facts about net neutrality:

Myth: Internet carriers have no intention of favoring particular websites over others.

Fact: Network owners have stated their intent to build business models based on discrimination. In fact, the top executives of nearly every major telephone company have stated clearly in the pages of Business Week, the Wall Street Journal and the Washington Post that they intend to discriminate or degrade the content and services of their competitors who don't pay for a spot in the fast lane.

Myth: Net neutrality is not needed to protect internet consumers' online experience.

Fact: Up to this point, the consumer has been the ultimate decision-maker online; the network owners simply transmitted data over the wires, regardless of its content, and without a middleman. But with-

out net neutrality, the Internet will look more like cable TV. Network owners will decide which channels, content and applications are available; consumers will have to choose from their menu. Allowing broadband carriers to control what people see and do online would fundamentally undermine the principles that have made the Internet such a success.

Myth: Net neutrality is bad for the US economy.

Fact: Opposition to net neutrality is anti-business, anti-innovation and anti-consumer. The principal beneficiaries of a non-neutral Internet would be a few massive telecom companies, and almost nobody else. Currently, the Internet allows small businesses to compete directly with huge ones. Net neutrality ensures that innovators can start small and dream big about being the next eBay or Google without facing insurmountable hurdles.

Without net neutrality, startups and entrepreneurs will be muscled out of the marketplace by big corporations that pay for a top spot on the Web. Writing net neutrality into law would preserve the freedoms we currently enjoy on the Internet. For all their talk about "deregulation," the cable and telephone giants don't want real competition--they want the game rigged so they always win.

What is the legal status of Net Neutrality?

Net Neutrality has not been written into our laws yet. However, it has become a major issue as Congress considers new telecommunications laws. In May, the House of Representatives passed a telecom bill that does not include adequate net neutrality protections. On June 28, the Senate Commerce Committee passed its own telecom bill, S. 2686. A pro-net neutrality amendment backed by Senator Cantwell and others was (barely) voted down. Now, Internet freedom advocates must work to ensure that their Senators vote to stop this bill from passing this fall.

MEDIA OWNERSHIP

Why is "media ownership" an issue?

In past decades, the US government placed limits on the number of newspapers, radio and TV stations which a single company could own nationally, or within a particular market. These rules support democratic values by helping ensure the public has access to multiple voices and opinions in a diverse media culture. Since the Reagan administration, however, these rules have been under attack by corporate media owners who wish to expand without regulatory checks and balances. After the industry-supported Telecommunications Act of 1996 abolished limits on national radio ownership, hundreds of radio stations were gobbled up by increasingly large owners. Clear Channel ballooned from 40 stations to over 1200; local ownership became rare, and minority ownership nearly extinct. Concentrated ownership encourages owners to enact cost-saving measures such as shrinking or abolishing news departments, "voice-tracking" fake local DJs, reducing the number of independent voices on the air.

What is the status of media ownership now?

As late as 1983, 50 companies owned the majority of all U.S. news media. By 1990, this number had dwindled down to fewer than two dozen. Now - largely thanks to the enormous deregulation the 1996 Telecommunications Act provided - that number has fallen to six. Media consolidation continues today at an astonishing pace, and media companies are pushing for further de-regulation.

Myths and facts about media ownership:

Myth: The media's only "agenda" is informing its consumers.

Fact: The media's most deliberate and systematic bias is almost entirely unaddressed: the media's corporate bias. 51 of the world's 100 largest economic entities are corporations, meaning that the majority of the world's major economies are businesses whose primary accountability is to their shareholders. As some of the world's largest corporations. Media cor-

porations' self-interest--to expand, increase profits, quash competition, and lower costs--trumps other considerations.

Myth: There is enough diversity of opinion in the media, and especially in blogs on the Internet, that regulation is unnecessary.

Fact: While Internet news consumption is growing, it is still dwarfed by cable and broadcast news consumption. Plus, Internet news readers are mostly relying on online counterparts to large broadcast outlets or newspapers. High-speed Internet access remains unfortunately linked to class indicators such as income and educational level; the Telecom bill currently being considered in the Senate will reinforce, rather than change this situation. Finally, if we lose Net Neutrality protections, the Internet will no longer be the infinitely free "marketplace of ideas" we are used to.

Myth: Media just gives the people what they want, otherwise they'll change the channel.

Fact: In their quest for high returns, media conglomerates frequently sacrifice content for profit. For example, Radio conglomerate Clear Channel saves enormous amounts of money by standardizing program formats--and consolidating staff--for its 1225 stations. Local listeners have almost no ability to influence what they hear on local stations.

Myth: Large media businesses can report news just as well as smaller ones, if not better.

Fact: Not surprisingly, big media companies' economic motivations often work against their public service obligations and the journalistic values of TV news departments. Local news--even lightweight or badly produced local news--is more expensive than video news releases or network filler. In fact, in 2004 the FCC produced a study confirming a distinct correlation between local ownership and more local news. Unfortunately, the FCC leadership at the time ordered that study destroyed, and it was only leaked two years later.



reclaimthedia.org