

Public Service Commission Must Fight for Internet Freedom

by Roger Koopman

When, in the spirit of bipartisanship, Congress and the Clinton Administration deregulated the Internet in 1994, the results were predictable. Fueled by freedom and entrepreneurship, the United States became the international Internet leader, attracting a steady stream of investment capital and creating the most robust, innovative and competitive broadband market in the world. All of that is about to change though, because the Federal Communications Commission knuckled under to a president whose vision for America is conformity, not liberty -- a place where free thought and free expression must first be approved by the federal government.

They call it "Net Neutrality," which, like the camel's nose under the tent, appears harmless enough. But what's the real agenda here? Net Neutrality is a solution in search of a problem, based on the unsubstantiated fear that unless the government steps in and places its homogenizing thumb on the Internet, service providers (ISPs) will somehow create unequal access for transmission of broadband data. Thus, we must be protected from such bureaucratic boogymen as "throttling," "fast lanes," and "blocking."

But guess what? Free market competition (which the FCC stands ready to ruin) has already exorcized those ghosts and goblins. Our nation has 17 large broadband providers and over 3,000 smaller ones. There is no monopoly and there is no problem. There is only the insatiable appetites of Obama Administration extremists, who wish to place every human activity under the expert supervision of the government elite.

The biggest target of the professional controllers and planners is the Internet. They will start with so-called Net Neutrality regulations, that establish the precedent of governmental control over Internet commerce. That, warns dissenting FCC commissioner Michael O'Reilly, will create a "slippery slope" toward ever-increasing federal interference and control of every aspect of Internet freedom. "Where will it end?" asks O'Reilly. Where indeed. Just ask radical financiers like George Soros, who alone has pumped \$83 million into the coffers of Alinsky-style extremist groups, dedicated to imposing government control over the Internet and its content.

How we have come to this precipice is a disturbing story in itself. In 2010, the US Court of Appeals struck down similar efforts by the FCC, asserting that the FCC did not have regulatory power over broadband. All internet users breathed a sigh of relief. But not for long. Nobody anticipated the unprecedented and illegal pressure brought to bear on the "independent" FCC

by Barack Obama. The three Democratic commissioners caved. The two Republicans fought back, in vain.

So the FCC gave birth to a 332-page Regulatory Rosemary's Baby, released to the public only after the commission had voted. This time, they based their regs on the bizarre notion that the Internet should be reclassified as a "public utility" under the Telecommunications Act of 1934, a law passed for a bygone era, when phone companies were indeed monopolies and broadband did not exist.

What will be the end result if the FCC "baby" reaches maturity? Internet investment will be driven from our shores, to lands seen as more free and people more brave. America's broadband market will become far less competitive and more monopolistic, as small and rural providers are gobbled up or close their doors – prompting yet more federal regulation and taxpayer subsidies. Most of all, it will be a crushing blow to freedom of action and freedom of speech.

Last February, FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler addressed a national conference of public service commissioners to discuss Net Neutrality. When I later asked why no tough questions were posed, I learned that this "public servant" would only come if he was able to pre-screen (censor) the queries. It was clear that the FCC does not want state PSCs involved in this vital issue.

Which is exactly why the Montana Public Service Commission should lead the way in raising public awareness and fighting back. I will make every effort to do just that.

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