

US Federal Communications Commission sets end date for net neutrality

By Will Morrow
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In the latest step in the drive by the US ruling class to censor the Internet, the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) on Thursday published its order abolishing Internet neutrality in the governmental Federal Register, initiating a 60-day countdown for the law to come into force.

The FCC's ruling represents a far-reaching attack on the democratic rights of the entire population and public access to the Internet. Beginning April 23, multibillion-dollar corporate behemoths, such as Verizon and AT&T, will be free to restrict access to or completely censor Internet sites as they see fit.

On December 14, the FCC voted by a 3-2 margin to overturn the previous characterization of Internet broadband as a public utility under the 1934 Communications Act. This definition required that Internet Service Providers (ISPs) provide customers with the same level of Internet access, regardless of what they were connecting to. Moreover, ISPs could not selectively block or reduce speeds for specific sites or services, and could not create a multi-tiered system by charging users or content providers for higher traffic speeds.

Since the ISPs will not be forced to treat all content the same, they will be able to block web sites and services at their discretion. The claim, promoted by the FCC and its chairman Ajit Pai, that competition between ISPs for market share will prevent such actions ignores the fact that the telecommunications infrastructure is largely monopolized, with four companies controlling 75 percent of all high-speed Internet service. Over half of American households have only one ISP to "choose" from. These corporations are now being handed an incredible power over global communications.

The ISPs will also be able to establish a class-based

system of Internet access, including by offering "packages" of Internet content. They may, for example, introduce a premium "Wikipedia package," charging customers to access Wikipedia, a repository of humanity's collective knowledge currently accessed by over 400 million people each day, just as cable television networks charge for news and sports.

The FCC's order, which it first released on January 4, announces this attack on the freedom of expression with the Orwellian title of "Restoring Internet Freedom." It declares that it is returning to the "light-touch regulatory scheme that enabled the Internet to develop and thrive for nearly two decades." In fact, the principle of net neutrality had been in *de facto* operation ever since the public Internet first emerged in the 1990s, and was formally codified by the FCC in 2015 in the face of lobbying by the private ISPs.

The opening of a 60-day window allows for legal challenges against the change. Among the many suits that have already been announced, the private video hosting provider Vimeo and software maker Mozilla yesterday filed a suit against the FCC. Technology giants Google and Facebook announced last month that they would be supporting a legal challenge.

These corporations have opposed the ruling because it threatens their own business interests. Their concern is that the ISPs will be empowered to prioritize their own content with faster Internet speeds, giving them a business advantage over Facebook, Google, Twitter, Netflix and other content providers.

Some Democratic politicians have similarly joined these companies in opposing the ending of net neutrality. Fifty Senate Democrats supported a resolution to overturn the FCC decision that has little chance of passing Congress. Twenty-two state

attorneys general have also joined a lawsuit against the FCC by New York Attorney General and Democrat Eric Schneiderman.

Despite the Democrats' posturing as defenders of net neutrality, the current chair of the FCC, Ajit Pai, who has led the push for ending net neutrality for years, was appointed by Barack Obama to the commission in 2012, and later promoted by Donald Trump in 2017.

In fact, the Democrats, working with the major technology companies and US intelligence agencies, have been at the forefront of the drive to censor the Internet in the name of fighting "Russian meddling" and "fake news."

On January 12, Facebook announced changes to its news feed that will deprioritize news content for its more than 2 billion users in favour of "personal moments." It announced on January 19 and January 29 that it is promoting "local" news and content published by "authoritative sources," meaning pro-government propaganda outlets like the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, as opposed to alternative and independent publications. In April 2017, Google implemented changes to its search ranking algorithms in order to prioritize "authoritative" websites and blacklists left-wing, antiwar and progressive publications, including the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The *New York Times*, which has been at the forefront of the Democrats' campaign to censor the Internet, made clear the aims of this campaign in its editorial published February 22, "Why Americans could believe the worst from Russian trolls." Developing the Democrats' unsubstantiated claims that Russia sought to "meddle" in the 2016 elections, the article argued that the Kremlin was successful because it was able to exploit "homegrown" sources of political opposition and dissent.

The inescapable conclusion flowing from this argument is that political opposition is essentially treasonous, and must be censored and suppressed.

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