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ECONOMY & BUSINESS

# Comrades for Net Neutrality

By JOHN FUND | February 26, 2015 6:00 PM



FCC chairman Tom Wheeler (Alex Wong/Getty)

## The powers behind the FCC's muscling of the Internet

Today's vote by a bitterly divided Federal Communications Commission that the Internet should be regulated as a public utility is the culmination of a decade-long battle by the Left. Using money from George Soros and liberal foundations that totaled at least **\$196 million**, radical activists finally succeeded in ramming through "net neutrality," or the idea that all data should be transmitted equally over the Internet. The final push involved **unprecedented political pressure** exerted by the Obama White House on FCC chairman Tom Wheeler, head of an ostensibly independent regulatory body.

"Net neutrality's goal is to empower the federal government to ration and apportion Internet bandwidth as it sees fit, and to thereby control the Internet's content," says Phil Kerpen, an anti-net-neutrality activist from the group American Commitment.

The courts have previously ruled the FCC's efforts to impose "net neutrality" out of bounds, so the battle isn't over. But for now, the FCC has granted itself enormous power to micromanage the largely unrestrained Internet.

Back in the 1990s, the Clinton administration teamed up with Internet pioneers to promote a hands-off approach to the new industry and keep it free from discriminatory taxation. Many still prefer that policy. Nicholas Negroponte, founder of the MIT Media Lab and the charity One Laptop Per Child, says that net neutrality "doesn't make sense" because "the truth is, not all bits [of data] are created equal."

Will Marshall, head of the Progressive Policy Institute (which was once a favorite think tank of Clinton Democrats), **issued a statement** that net neutrality "endorses a backward-looking policy that

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would apply the brakes to the most dynamic sector of America's economy.

But such voices have been drowned out by left-wing activists who want to manage the Internet to achieve their political objectives. The most influential of these congregate around the deceptively named Free Press, a liberal lobby co-founded in 2002 by Robert McChesney, a University of Illinois communications professor.

His goals have always been clear. "At the moment, the battle over network neutrality is not to completely eliminate the telephone and cable companies," he told the website SocialistProject in 2009. "But the ultimate goal is to get rid of the media capitalists in the phone and cable companies and to divest them from control." Earlier in 2000, he told the Marxist magazine *Monthly Review*: "Our job is to make media reform part of our broader struggle for democracy, social justice, and, dare we say it, socialism." When I interviewed him in 2010, he admitted he is a socialist and said he was "hesitant to say I'm not a Marxist."

In essence, what McChesney and his followers want is an Unfree Press — a media world that promotes their values. "To cast things in neo-Marxist terms that they could appreciate, they want to take control of the information means of production," says Adam Therier of the blog TechLiberation.

Certainly McChesney seems blind to the dangers of media control on the left. In 2007, he co-authored a remarkable survey of the media under Hugo Chávez's already clearly thuggish regime in Venezuela: "Aggressive, unqualified political dissent is alive and well in the Venezuelan mainstream media, in a manner few other democratic nations have ever known, including our own."

Despite his astonishingly radical goals, McChesney's Free Press group was able to leverage foundation cash and academic "research" into an influential force behind net neutrality. Julius Genachowski, President Obama's first FCC chairman, hired Free Press's Jen Howard as his press secretary. The FCC's chief diversity officer, Mark Lloyd, has co-authored a Free Press report demanding regulation of political talk radio. The FCC's National Broadband Plan cited research from Free Press and other left-wing groups backing net neutrality more than 50 times.

The battle for control of the Internet isn't over. Over two-thirds of the House and Senate are on record as opposing FCC regulation of the Internet, and a new president could change the policy overnight in 2017 even if the courts don't block it.



But for now, the "media reform" movement led by McChesney and his allies can claim bragging rights for their Saul Alinsky-style outflanking maneuver on Internet regulation. They financed the research behind the idea, installed their political allies in power, got the government to consider them experts on the issues they cared deeply about, and finally ran roughshod over both Congress and an initially reluctant FCC chairman. Conservatives should study how the Left won on this issue even as they acknowledge and fight the illegitimacy of many of the results.



**JOHN FUND** is *National Review's* national-affairs reporter. @johnfund

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