

October 21, 2009

Chairman Julius Genachowski
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street SW
Washington, DC 20554

Dear Chairman Julius Genachowski:

ColorOfChange.org is writing to urge the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to support the fundamental Internet principle of network neutrality. For African-Americans and several other communities, the Internet offers a transformative opportunity to build a more equitable media system. It allows all Americans to speak for themselves without having to convince large media companies that their voices are worthy of being heard. It has become a tool that affords truly unique and broad communication and expression for everyone, is democratic in nature, and clearly serves the public interest.

Black Americans are increasingly a part of the Internet and are using it actively in large numbers as a platform for business, communication, exchange of ideas, and entertainment. Black entrepreneurs have taken advantage of the openness of the platform and low barriers to entry; thriving online communities of African-Americans have formed; news and media outlets which cater to the Black community have found a large audience; and public interest groups which serve a Black constituency have begun leveraging the Internet as a tool for grassroots activism and civic participation.

The openness of Internet infrastructure – known as net neutrality – is a defining characteristic of the Internet that has enabled it to become a medium that serves the Black community in unique ways. Network neutrality protects users' choice and equal opportunity on the Internet.

Powerful phone and cable companies are seeking to boost their profits by gutting these basic protections and gaining more control over the content. If successful, this plan would have dire consequences for those who are often marginalized by our nation's mainstream media system.

Low barriers to entry

Part of what has enabled growing Black entrepreneurship online is the low barrier to entry that net neutrality provides. Because of net neutrality, the infrastructure of the Internet does not, and cannot discriminate among content providers, services, or businesses; Internet service providers (ISPs) cannot charge websites for improved access to Internet users. When it comes to the basic technical ability of website operators to reach Internet users, net neutrality provides a level playing field.

Black-oriented content on the Internet

Net neutrality makes the Internet friendlier than any other communications medium for businesses and organizations that provide content and services aimed at minority audiences. This is because the content available on the Internet is not limited by commercial relationships with network operators – as is the case with broadcast media like radio and television.

Websites that serve a Black audience can establish themselves cheaply, and their growth and viewership is based largely on the value of what they provide, rather than the amount of money they can spend on advertisements, or the relationships they have with established media outlets.

Because the Internet, unlike broadcast media, allows for a limitless diversity of content, it can provide content and services that serve minority communities in unique ways, and already has to a large degree. As Black people continue to connect to the Internet in larger numbers, content and services on the Internet will continue to develop organically to suit their needs, provided the Internet continues to operate as it has since its inception. But if Internet service providers are allowed to leverage their control of Internet access to position themselves as regulators of content, erecting greater barriers to entry, that process will be hindered and controlled by large corporate interests, rather than driven by demand, entrepreneurship, and innovation. Strong network neutrality rules are needed to prevent this.

Grassroots organizing and civic participation

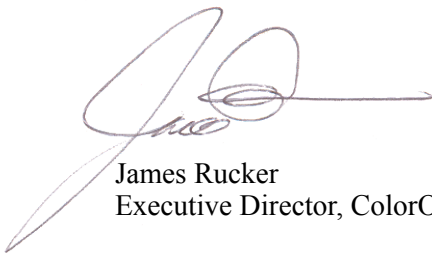
Net neutrality makes the Internet a unique platform for grassroots political activism and organizing. Because websites succeed in direct proportion to the demand for what they provide, not the money they can spend, nonprofits and political advocacy groups have been able to thrive online, and develop innovative and relatively cheap ways to reach their constituency and galvanize large numbers of people into timely, unified political action. Without net neutrality, grassroots public interest organizations would, at best, be on unequal footing with big businesses and the political establishment. At worst, they could be subject to corporate censorship if their message or their work were seen as a threat or a nuisance to the companies that control Internet access, or their partners.

African-Americans and other under-represented groups have long fought for a more diverse and inclusive media system. Discrimination and segregation prevented people of color from obtaining radio or TV licenses when these media were first created. Cable TV promised to be a real alternative for those seeking more diverse programming; it didn't happen that way. Now, many of these very same companies want to control Internet users by selecting the online content, applications and services they can access.

President Obama has repeatedly spoken out in support of network neutrality, which has been the centerpiece of the White House's media and technology agenda. Obama has been joined by Speaker Nancy Pelosi; Reps. Ed Markey, Anna Eshoo, Donna Edwards, Henry Waxman and Lynn Woolsey; Sens. Byron Dorgan and Chris Dodd; among others.

This is an issue of vital and urgent concern to ColorOfChange.org and our members. We urge you to join with us to protect this fundamental Internet freedom that will amplify the vital voices of African-Americans and other under-represented groups.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'James Rucker', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

James Rucker
Executive Director, ColorOfChange.org