

“Net Neutrality”, Save the Internet Campaign: A Common Carrier Free from Corporate Encroachment

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[Popular Resistance](#)

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This week has been a turning point in a seven month campaign to Save the Internet. The campaign began when FCC Chair, Tom Wheeler, told the media in May that he was considering creating a tiered Internet where wealthy corporations could pay for faster service giving them an advantage over start-ups, small businesses, entrepreneurs and citizen activists.

The Campaign for the Impossible: Internet as Common Carrier and Net Neutrality

The net neutrality rules were thrown out by a court in January 2014. Following that decision, millions of people emailed, petitioned and telephoned the FCC urging net neutrality but the FCC did not seem to be listening. More was needed.

Popular Resistance joined with net neutrality activists to not only stop the tiered Internet but to push for treating the Internet as a common carrier where there would be equal access for all without discrimination.

We participated in a protest 8 days before the public meeting where the FCC would announce its new rule-making proceeding. At that protest, we announced we would sleep at the FCC until the meeting.

The first night we slept at the FCC by ourselves. That night, people visited us and the next day one person joined us, bringing the first tent. The media began to notice as we put up massive banners and lined the outside of the FCC with signs. The [encampment started growing](#).

Every morning we stood by the garage and entrances to the FCC greeting everyone who worked there with message calling for net neutrality and reclassifying the Internet as a common carrier. FCC employees came out to thank us for standing up for net neutrality.

The encampment was supported by the Internet freedom movement. Groups like Fight for the Future, Free Press, Demand Progress and two dozen other organizations all worked together. The FCC began receiving [thousands of phone calls](#), tens of thousands of emails and hundreds of thousands of petitions.

[TIME Magazine](#) reported the “eighth floor executive office has been thrown into chaos amid a mounting backlash that [shut down its phone lines](#) as a growing number of Open Internet advocates [camp out in front of their office](#).” They reported Chairman Wheeler had to hold a meeting to lift the morale of the dispirited staff. The encampment was also covered in [the Washington Post](#), [Guardian](#) and other major outlets.

Fissures began to develop among corporations with the broadband providers and telecoms, e.g. Comcast, Verizon and AT&T supporting a tiered Internet, but all the [content providers](#) like [google](#), [Facebook](#), [Amazon](#) and many others opposing it. [Internet investors](#) and [start-ups](#) came out on the side of net neutrality. As the pressure grew, three of the five FCC commissioners visited the camp, including the chair, Tom Wheeler.

A large protest bringing hundreds of people to the FCC was held the day of the public hearing to announce the rulemaking.

As the rule-making hearing began, three of us stood up and interrupted demanding “real net neutrality,” “reclassification as a common carrier” and protection of the Internet as the forum for Freedom of Speech in the 21st Century.

Major Breakthrough: FCC Includes Reclassification in Rulemaking Proceeding

At the meeting, [Wheeler used rhetoric](#) that sounded like he supported real net neutrality but proposed a rule that would have created a tiered Internet. But, the pressure had become so intense that Chairman Wheeler included the movement’s proposal: reclassifying the Internet as a common carrier under Title II and restoring net neutrality rules; along with his tiered Internet proposal. The FCC wanted comments on both options.

✘ The comments started to pour in. Thousands of people were commenting every day. The numbers grew rapidly. Then on June 1, 2014, John Oliver of HBO’s *Last Week Tonight*, jumped in with a 13 minute monologue that explained net neutrality, described Comcast as behaving like a mafia shakedown and compared putting Chairman Wheeler in charge of the Internet as equivalent to a dingo babysitting. This spurred even more public comments.

The net neutrality movement continued to build. There were [protests organized at FCC office’s](#) all over the country, then [protests at Comcast and Verizon offices](#), [protests at Obama fundraisers](#) and more protests at the FCC in Washington, DC. Popular Resistance produced a “musical protest” entitled “Which Side Are You On, Tom?” asking whether Tom Wheeler was with the people or the telecoms? For four weeks before the musical we leafleted the FCC, inviting employees, including Chairman Wheeler, to join us for the musical. We had heard so much thanks from FCC employees that we published an [open letter thanking FCC employees](#) for their support for net neutrality.

An online [Internet Slowdown was held](#) resulting in “2 million emails and nearly 300,000 calls (averaging 1,000 per minute) to Congress. On top of that, so many pro-Net Neutrality comments were filed (722,364 to be exact) that the FCC’s site broke (again).”

By the time the public comment period was coming to an end, [net neutrality had become a bandwagon](#) with so many comments it [crashed the FCC’s system](#). In the end more than 3.7 million people had commented – [by far the record number of comments](#) on any FCC rulemaking. [Analysis of the comments](#) showed that 99% wanted net neutrality. The people had spoken clearly and loudly – they wanted an Internet free of discrimination, with equal access for all where broadband and telecom companies could not impact content.

✘ Wheeler Still Not Listening

Despite this overwhelming support for reclassification under Title II, Wheeler continued to try to find a way to satisfy Comcast, Verizon, AT&T and other telecoms and broadband providers. Rather than full reclassification and real net neutrality, Wheeler was urging a hybrid plan of partial reclassification which would continue to allow telecoms to negotiate special deals with corporations for different services.


Anger grew in the Internet community that the FCC was not listening to 3.7 million people and was putting the profits of a handful of corporations ahead of protecting the Internet. Various groups began to take action – when commissioners opposed to net neutrality held meetings, [advocates for net neutrality were there](#), [commissioners were invited to meetings](#) around the country, [FCC employees were called](#), [75,000 people told the White House to fire](#) or demote Wheeler, the White House was warned that the Democrats could lose the Internet vote and [photos were posted](#) showing support for net neutrality (submit yours!).

Pressure continued to grow. Rumors began to surface that the Obama administration was considering speaking out on the issue but that advisers were divided. To help them decide, a [protests was held at the White House](#) and in 30 cities across the country on November 6.

We learned that the greatest obstacle to net neutrality was the Chairman. We then decided that it was necessary to bring the message directly to Chairman Wheeler that he needed to listen to the people. As a former top lobbyist for the telecom and broadband industry, Wheeler needed to be reminded that he worked for the people now, not the telecoms. We decided to [confront him at home and block his driveway](#).

As we turned the corner to his house, Wheeler was just coming out the door. Three of us jumped out of the car and sat in his driveway, our social media person got out and started filming, the rest of us joined quickly bringing signs to cover the front of his house. Wheeler tried to engage us, initially posing for a photo-op in front of a Save The Internet sign. We told him this was not a photo-op for him but people telling him it was time to listen to the people. We sang to him: “Which side are you on, Tom. Are you with the people or with the telecoms?” We continued to make it clear that we wanted full reclassification, not hybrid plans as well as real net neutrality rules put in place.

President Obama Joins the Debate

 When Barack Obama ran for office he was outspoken in his support for the level playing field of the Internet. He spoke about how it was an engine for creativity in the economy and promised he would “not take a back seat” to anyone in protecting the Internet. His appointments as FCC chair have been disappointing as none have been advocates for net neutrality. When President Obama picked Tom Wheeler as chairman, someone who had been a major fundraiser during his campaigns and who had been a top lobbyist for the industry, there was concern in the net neutrality community.

Prior to November 10, President Obama had [only modestly spoken in opposition](#) to an Internet with fast lanes and slow lanes based on how much a corporation paid. But two hours after we blockaded Wheeler’s driveway President Obama said everything we wanted him to say. He said it with specificity, not leaving himself any wiggle room for a political escape hatch.

President Obama called for reclassification of the Internet under Title II and putting in place net neutrality rules. [The president said](#):

“An open Internet is essential to the American economy, and increasingly to our very way of life. By lowering the cost of launching a new idea, igniting new political movements, and bringing communities closer together, it has been one of the most significant democratizing influences the world has ever known.

““Net neutrality” has been built into the fabric of the Internet since its creation — but it is also a principle that we cannot take for granted. We cannot allow Internet service providers (ISPs) to restrict the best access or to pick winners and losers in the online marketplace for services and ideas. That is why today, I am asking the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to answer the call of almost 4 million public comments, and implement the strongest possible rules to protect net neutrality.”

He went on to give specific recommendations to the FCC on what was required.

That night [we returned to Wheeler’s home](#) but with a non-confrontational attitude. Things had changed dramatically since the morning blockade of his driveway, not only had the President come out strongly but others were joining the President’s call. The momentum had shifted and a national consensus was forming in favor of reclassification and net neutrality. We gave his wife a bottle of wine with a note saying we were “looking for an Internet hero.” We greeted Wheeler when he returned home in a friendly manner and then talked about the national consensus and how the FCC needed to be part of it.

✘ We also said that if they did so, the movement would ensure Congress did not take action against the FCC. We began to shift our attention to the telecoms and broadband providers with a [protest at the National Cable and Telecommunications Association, which Wheeler used to head](#), and now was run by Michael Powell the former FCC commissioner who made the mistake of reclassifying the Internet from a common carrier to an information service in 2002.

Shockingly, the Washington Post reported the next day that Chairman Wheeler was thinking of breaking with the president. Not only had Wheeler ignored millions of Americans who took the time to comment to the FCC, now he was going to ignore the President who appointed him to the position!

✘ We had a series of escalating tactics planned to pressure Wheeler. We had put those aside when President Obama spoke out and momentum had shifted, but the Washington Post article pushed us to review those tactics and let him know that we were upset with the direction The Post reported he was considering. We picked a relatively mild tactic, placing door knockers on the doors in his neighborhood with Tom Wheeler’s picture on them and letting neighbors know he was threatening the Internet. This resulted in a strong response from the FCC.

Some press reports have clarified that Wheeler had not decided to break with the President, but had also not made a decision on reclassification yet. This was a nuanced distancing from The Post story, enough for us not to escalate further. While Wheeler has still not made it clear whether he will follow the views of millions of Americans and the President, we are watching closely and waiting to see the direction he goes.

Celebrate and Press On

On Thursday night, we joined with other net neutrality advocates in holding a [#PartyAtTheFCC](#) to celebrate how far we have come but also to build energy for the next phase of advocacy. We tried to invite the commissioners, but FCC security prevented it.

Despite rain and cold, the [#PartyAtTheFCC](#) went forward, along with parties in more than a dozen cities, ending with people in the FCC driveway chanting “Party at the FCC” and “Net Neutrality Now.”

We know we have not won yet, but we also know we are capable of winning. The battle for the future of the Internet has been engaged and the right solution – resclassification under Title II and putting in place strong net neutrality rules – has gone from being politically impossible to seemingly inevitable.

It is proof that even in a government corrupted by money, united and mobilized people who act strategically with creative tactics can win. Stay tuned and get ready to become engaged if things begin to turn the wrong way. Winning the battle for the future of the Internet is one that will impact each of us, and we all must take responsibility for it.

Margaret Flowers and Kevin Zeese are organizers with [Popular Resistance](#), which provides daily movement news and resources. [Sign up for their daily newsletter](#); and follow them on twitter, [@PopResistance](#).

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