



STATE OF ILLINOIS
OFFICE OF LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR PAT QUINN

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NET NEUTRALITY BILL OP-ED **By Illinois Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn**

Two hundred and thirty years ago, the Founding Fathers of our country wrote the Declaration of Independence. That document announced the creation of a brand-new nation founded on principles of liberty and justice.

Back in those days, it took weeks for copies of the Declaration to reach all 13 colonies. Today, of course, the Founders wouldn't have to mess around with printing presses or horse-drawn mail carts. They would just post the Declaration of Independence on the Internet, and let the entire world know instantly that a new, free nation had been formed.

It's that immediate access to a global audience, that freedom of information, that gives the Internet the power to transform the world – and it's that democratic access that is threatened by a proposed new federal law now being considered by the U.S. Senate.

Today, thanks to the Internet's open system, we can get our news from television stations on six continents. We can start new e-businesses from our basements, competing for customers on a level playing field with giants like E-Bay and Amazon. We can share our thoughts and opinions to anyone willing to click on our home pages. Federal law protects our right to access what we want, when we want it.

But under the so-called "Communications Opportunity, Promotion and Enhancement Act of 2006", which passed the U.S. House of Representatives in May, big cable and telephone companies will be handed the right to charge premium prices for any "content providers" – whether young entrepreneurs, budding filmmakers or Illinois consumer advocates – who want to send information at top speed to everybody who wants it.

Instead of treating all Internet traffic equally, the phone and cable company big shots want a change in federal law that would allow them to put a high pricetag on high-speed transmission, and slow down – or even interrupt -- the traffic of any independent website that refuses to pay. So concerned homeowners who have paid their Internet providers top dollar for a high-speed connection might be forced to wait – and wait, and wait – to download video footage of garbage trucks illegally dumping toxic wastes.

By forcing small, independent providers into the slow lanes of the Information Superhighway, those big cable and phone companies will have the power to drive upstart competitors out of business.

Right now, an unlimited number of on-line providers offer us access to just about any legal content we want. But without free, open competition, the big phone and cable companies will have the power to limit our Internet options to the same tired old programming now available on cable tv -- "57 channels and nothin' on..." as Bruce Springsteen puts it.

High-priced lobbyists for the big telephone and cable companies claim that keeping prices level for all providers – a concept known as "Net Neutrality" – is equivalent to requiring level prices for all mail delivery, whether U.S. Postal Service or FedEx.

But that's a bogus comparison. In fact, the big cable and phone companies' proposal is like a shipping system that allows FedEx to charge you full price for overnight delivery of a novel you ordered from a small on-line bookseller – then letting your package sit in a warehouse for a few days because the little bookshop couldn't afford to pay FedEx a hefty add-on delivery fee.

We don't want a multi-tiered Internet pricing system that lets big corporations decide what we can access and what we can't. We need to remind Congress of one basic lesson in technology that has remained true from the days of the Founding Fathers until the present: If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

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