

Written by Steven Peterman

ALT.SCREEN

The Next Gen

Don't look back:
the telecommunications
industry is
in pursuit.



Net neutrality. Have you heard of it? If not, run to your computer and learn more. Fast.

There is a move afoot by some of the largest telephone and cable companies in the United States to block or discriminate against access to legal material on the Internet. In addition, some companies such as AT&T, Time Warner, and Comcast have been devising schemes that would allow them to charge Internet sites to distribute material over the Internet, or charge companies a fee in order for customers to be able to download content quickly.

The cable and telephone companies aren't just thinking about charging websites for distribution, they're actually saying it. In 2005, AT&T CEO Edward Whitacre told *Business Week*, "How do you think they're going to get to customers? Through a broadband pipe. Cable companies have them. We

The unraveling of the financial interest and syndication rules, a process that began in 1992, has allowed for the greatest consolidation of media we have ever seen. Instead of a rich marketplace of ideas, today we have seven conglomerates controlling nearly all of the information and content we see.

have them. Now what they would like to do is use my pipes free, but I ain't going to let them do that because we have spent this capital and we have to have a return on it. So there's going to have to be some mechanism for these people who use these pipes to pay for the portion they're using. Why should they be allowed to use my pipes?"

Scared? You should be.

And it's already started. In April 2005, AOL blocked e-mail that mentioned www.dearaol.com, an advocacy website opposed to AOL's short-lived pay-per-e-mail scheme. In August 2007, during a live webcast of a Pearl Jam concert, AT&T muted lyrics from lead singer Eddie Vedder that were critical of President George Bush. Among the lines that couldn't be heard by Internet viewers were "George Bush, leave this world alone," and "George Bush, find yourself a new home." Most recently, Comcast unilaterally

and without customer notification decided to block access to all BitTorrent computer applications.

Two weeks ago, I traveled to Washington, D.C., to testify before the House of Representatives on behalf of the WGAW in support of an open Internet. Two weeks prior, Patric Verrone went to the U.S. Senate to express the WGAW's support for net neutrality. Here's why . . .

When I began my writing career 20 years ago you could watch *Roseanne*, *Cosby*, *Cheers*, *The Wonder Years*, and *Murphy Brown*. These shows were all considered smart, funny, sometimes touching, and even thought-provoking. And they were all made by independent production companies.

Unfortunately, during the years since, those companies have disappeared. The unraveling of the financial interest and syndication rules, a process that began in 1992, has allowed for the greatest consolidation of media we have ever seen. Instead of a rich marketplace of ideas, today we have seven conglomerates controlling nearly all of the information and content we see. Because this small group now acts as producer, studio, and network, there has been an inevitable stifling of creativity—and diversity—and because they maintain a chokehold over distribution, there has been nowhere else for the creative community to go. Until the Internet.

It is now abundantly clear that the Internet is the new television. Today you can watch episodes of almost any series you want, any time you want, on your computer or phone. Tomorrow, you'll be downloading first-run movies. And we in the Writers Guild are determined not to repeat the "Old Media" experience.

During our recent 100-day strike, many writers became interested in creating original content for the web. Some have already signed deals with new-media providers, while others aren't even waiting for a deal—they're posting original content for free, for the sheer joy of being able to work

Our voices are critical in this debate. As content creators, our opinions on this issue have a great deal of credibility in the halls of Congress. We also bring a different story to the need for keeping the Internet the open platform it is today.

without notes from 30 executives with no sense of humor. Because, unlike the current studio system, the Internet makes it possible for content creators to retain both ownership and control of the quality of what they create. The Internet also provides the American public with a virtually unlimited menu of news, information, and entertainment content from which to choose.

And, lest we forget, one of the many factors in helping us win this strike was the communications capacity of the Internet. Through e-mail, websites, YouTube videos, and multiple other new formats, WGA members were able to communicate with each other and the world about our cause. If the cable and phone companies have their way, we could be forced to pay for distribution of our material, whether it's a strike-support video or a message board or a three-minute webisode, and the payments would be at the whim of the companies that control distribution.

This debate continues to play out in Washington. In 2005, as a response to actions by certain cable and phone

companies, the FCC adopted policies that would protect an open Internet and prevent companies from blocking, degrading, or otherwise impeding the ability for Americans to access the legal content of their choice. The FCC has threatened to take up the issue of Comcast blocking BitTorrent applications, a clear violation of the policy principles of the FCC. Should the Commission take action, Comcast has in turn threatened to litigate the matter in the courts.

There are several pieces of legislation in Congress that would make an open Internet the law of the land. Congressmen Ed Markey (D-MA) and Chip Pickering (R-MS) sponsored House Resolution 5353, the "Internet Freedom Preservation Act." Senators Byron Dorgan (D-ND) and Olympia Snowe (R-ME) sponsored Senate Bill 215. Both bills would require Internet providers to provide unfettered access to online legal content and would prevent cable and phone companies from discriminating against content by speeding up or slowing down access to sites. Both bills would also prevent legal action by the Internet providers should they choose to take up the issue in the courts.

Given the power of the telecommunications lobby, we don't expect either of these bills to make it through Congress this year. However, we are hoping that we can continue to build support for an open Internet so that in 2009 we have a fighting chance of passing a federal law.

Our voices are critical in this debate. As content creators, our opinions on this issue have a great deal of credibility in the halls of Congress. We also bring a different story to the need for keeping the Internet the open platform it is today, and my reception made it clear that our representatives want to hear it. And I don't think it had anything to do with the Hannah Montana concert tickets I "accidentally" dropped on the subcommittee room floor

This is a critical fight for the WGA and for the country. Keeping the Internet an open platform has implications for the future of content, the future of our industry, and the future of the freedom of information in our country. Get involved. Your voice is needed! **WB**

To learn more about 'net neutrality and to get involved with the WGAW's program to protect the internet, contact the WGAW's political director John Kosinski at jkosinski@wga.org or 323.782.4859.

Steven Peterman serves as executive producer on the Emmy-nominated Disney Channel original series Hannah Montana, for which he co-wrote the pilot episode. A three-time Emmy-winning writer-producer, Peterman was part of the original writing staff of Murphy Brown with his long-time writing partner, Gary Dontzig. They developed and executive-produced Suddenly Susan for three seasons, served as consulting producers for the entire run of two years on State of Grace, and were co-exec producers on the final season of Becker.