

By

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Since their inception, public libraries have fought to ensure that all people – regardless of their background or beliefs – have access to knowledge, education, and opportunity. That noble mission hasn't changed, even as technology has. In addition to books and other materials, public libraries in every community in our great country are providing access to the computer and the internet, technology training classes, tablets, laptops, and more, offering everyone the tools they need to improve their lives, strengthen their communities and succeed. Libraries are at the foundation of the American dream.

The recent proposal by the Federal Communications Commission to abandon current net neutrality rules stands in direct opposition to this vital work. The proposal essentially gives broadband providers financial incentive to govern the openness of the Internet, paving the way for models in which consumers pay for priority access, and those who can't pay are limited to a "slow lane."

Without the current protections, the already yawning digital divide will be widened. We know in New York City, millions of families cannot afford broadband access at home. These families are in our branches, borrowing wi-fi hotspots or using our public computers to do homework, pay bills, apply for jobs, or communicate with relatives. For these New Yorkers, the 216 library branches across the city are their only option for access to technology. For the FCC to place internet access – something that in today's world is a necessity, not a luxury -- even further out of reach is appalling.

As strong advocates for and guardians of the right for people to seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction, New York City libraries cannot possibly support such a measure.

For us, though, it's more than just principle. We, too, would potentially need to pay broadband providers extra so our content can be delivered on the same terms as commercial content providers. For public libraries—most of which are government agencies or nonprofits—this could be a serious burden, as we deliver large amounts of video to our patrons, have users remotely accessing collections at home, we offer hundreds of expensive databases to the public for free. As libraries will increasingly collect digital assets, these costs will increase.

In other words, this proposal directly impacts the public's ability to access library collections and materials – the very tools that have helped even the playing field for so many in this country for centuries.

To see who will be affected, simply walk into any New York City library branch. See the students who literally cannot do their homework without our computers. See the parents and caregivers who are learning English and applying for jobs online to improve their circumstances. See the higher education students, independent researchers, and scholars who need our databases and online collections to further scholarship. Imagine how frustrated they will be, how demoralized, that they can no longer access what they need.

Critics of net neutrality are quick to point out that it could stifle innovation. Why, for example, would a cable company invest in having the highest speed data network if it could not reap the financial rewards of selling premium access to that higher speed data? These critics say the new proposal values private investment and innovation over government intervention.

Those are weak arguments. In reality, far more technology companies are financially incentivized to spur innovation around high speed internet than just the telecom and cable companies who own the infrastructure. The consumer demand to deliver uninterrupted streaming of the hottest new Netflix show or multi-player access to the latest Playstation game will keep internet speeds humming with or without net neutrality.