The Internet Is Freedom, and It Is Under Attack

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By William Rivers Pitt (/author/itemlist/user/44663), Truthout (http://truth-out.org) | Op-Ed

People protest during a rally to protect net neutrality as they voice their opposition to the impending FCC vote, outside the Federal Building in Los Angeles, California, on November 28, 2017. (Photo: MARK RALSTON / AFP / Getty Images)

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In the beginning were the words.

This is the story of the long progress of humanity from the early days of opposable thumbs to the first farmer, the first builder, the first cured disease, the first literature in its second edition, the first time secondhand information was shared as a means of expanding knowledge, the first time anything was read for the first time by a second person who then passed it on, because they could.

This is about the internet as it exists today.

It began when Bi Sheng invented the first moveable type, using materials made of porcelain during the Northern Song dynasty in China around 1040 AD. Some 300 years later, metal print books were created during the Goryeo dynasty in Korea. Less than 100 years later, Johannes Gutenberg invented the moveable-type printing press in Europe, using materials that remained standard in the process for more than half a millennium. The Bible he printed, and the machine he used to do it, are widely viewed as the beginning of the Age of Enlightenment, the Renaissance and an explosion of learning that transformed the world.

It was no longer just the priests and wealthy elite who had access to information. The world had the words on a page now, and slowly but surely everything changed, and changed again and then again. The only requirement for joining this ever-expanding new club was learning how to read. This was, and remains, no insignificant hurdle. Literacy has been power throughout the ages, right up to the modern era: Consider the relatively recent use of literacy tests (http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_vault/2013/06 /28/voting_rights_and_the_supreme_court_the_impossible_literacy_test_louisiana.html) to bar Black people from voting in the Jim Crow South. Poor people have historically and globally had less access to reading and education, yet another means of control.

Despite this, the flourishing of readily available words has become one of the most transformative forces in history. Want to learn how to build a house, grow crops, make a shirt, preserve food, knock down a fever, study a poem, find out about your ancestors or see what your local leaders have been up to lately? Go read about it. All of it.

Today, 1,000 years since Bi Sheng first made words with porcelain tools, the internet stands at the apex of the technology used to share and store information. It is a truly awe-inspiring machine made from billions of parts spread across the entire world and into the near reaches of space. Within its wires, motherboards and towering servers is the best and worst of us, a raw and undistilled vat of almost everything we are, the near sum of human knowledge that can be accessed by devices no larger than the palm of your hand. Oh, and cats (https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/16/opinion/sunday/how-cats-evolved-

It is daunting to encompass: The sum of human knowledge, access to more information than could be digested in a million lifetimes, right there in your pocket (if you have money for a phone) or on your desk (if you have money for a computer). It is tempting to call the sudden wide availability of information a step in human evolution, but that gets sticky with the science. Let there be no mistake in this, however: It was a revolution when it began 1,000 years ago, it was massive and it continues.

As far as the powerful are concerned, easily accessed information is the single most dangerous thing in the world.

That revolution is happening today and happening tomorrow, you and I are right there in the thick of it, and it all began with the availability of the words. Every time you crack open some dog-eared paperback or look up a recipe on Pinterest, you are participating in that revolution in a very small but actual way, because you are utilizing an incredibly powerful tool only recently available in the human experience: easily accessed information.

As far as the powerful are concerned, easily accessed information is the single most dangerous thing in the world. Indeed, the lessons abound:

* The distribution of Martin Luther's *95 Theses* shattered the Roman Catholic Church's iron hold on Europe;
* Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was a formative pillar of the environmental movement;
* Upton Sinclair changed the very nature of labor and manufacturing in the US with one widely read book;
* The US Constitution and Bill of Rights are themselves the product of a mass-distributed pamphleteering war between the Federalists and Anti-Federalists;
* Anne Frank's reprinted diary forced an unwilling world to confront the true nature of evil.

The pope, the king, mechanized fascism and big business: All exposed by the spread of easily accessed information, and that is a mightily foreshortened list.

These lessons are not lost on the powerful. The very first act of any despotic government is the harsh restriction of access to information across the board, be it public or educational. The Nazis burned books, and the Khmer Rouge butchered teachers. It is all of a piece. When you control the information, you control the people.

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Today, a small group of wealthy individuals would appear to have come to the conclusion that we're all getting too smart for our own good around here, and they have friends on the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Thanks to the FCC, ownership of television -- the internet's older half-brother who talks too much -- is currently being further condensed (http://thehill.com/policy/technology/360665-fcc-rolls-back-media-regulations-in-move-that-critics-say-benefits-sinclair) into the hands of a corporate few who have powerfully authoritarian views on the matters of freedom, democracy and information.

While television is a notoriously muscular -- not to mention devious -- purveyor of information, it is not the massive library/school/newspaper/sounding board/shopping mall the internet has become. Television is a one-way conversation; the internet is people. This is why the FCC's push to fundamentally rewire the internet (https://www.fcc.gov/restoring-internet-freedom) is so profoundly dangerous. The fact that the FCC has named this brazen power grab "Restoring Internet Freedom" makes it all the more insidious.

Why? Because the internet is wide open to any and all who can gain access to it, and access is as close as the local library. If the FCC overturns net neutrality, huge multinational corporations like AT&T, Verizon and Comcast will essentially be able to decide who gets to see what online, and for an unregulated fee. Worse, Title II (https://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2017/07/how-title-ii-goes-beyond-net-neutrality-to-protect-internet-users-from-isps/) of the Telecommunications Act gives the FCC what is called universal service authority, which grants it the power to make sure everyone in the US has access to the network. Remove Title II, which is central to the plan, and that availability will wither with no legal oversight.

For the internet service providers (ISPs), the core of the argument is control. Title II derives its authority from Congress, which first deployed the rule in 1934 to regulate the telephone monopoly enjoyed by AT&T. Title II, in short, labels the internet as a necessary utility (just as it did with the telephone) and makes it subject to the same regulations as other utilities like water and heat. The ISPs hate that the internet has been designated as such, and this push by the FCC to eliminate that designation is taking place at their behest.

Make no mistake: The internet is a utility (https://www.theguardian.com /technology/2017/nov/29/net-neutrality-internet-basic-right-america-trump-administration?utm_source=esp&utm_medium=Email& utm_campaign=GU+Today+USA+-+Collections+2017&utm_term=254536& subid=11404366&CMP=GT_US_collection), one that was built with your taxpayer dollars by your government in one of the most significant public works projects ever undertaken. With this utility, you do not get water when you turn on the spigot; you get words. Information. Freedom. When they own the words, they own you.

When you control the information, you control the people.

As with everything else these days, those who seek these restrictions do so for financial reasons. What is now an open field where every website is treated the same would become, under "Restoring Internet Freedom," a pay-to-play enterprise highly profitable to the ISPs. Indeed, the only "freedom" involved here is their freedom to jack up the fees for what would become a demonstrably inferior product.

There is, however, far more involved here than simple greed. I believe the powerful few who seek this monumental and dangerous change are doing so because a child viewing a photo of a solitary man defying a tank (http://100photos.time.com/photos/jeff-widener-tank-man) in Tiananmen Square might learn what courage in the face of wanton authority is. They are doing so, in part, because they fear the words, because words provide liberty in dark places. The internet is all the words in one place, for the first time in human history. Such a mighty tool is a threat to those who have so much but want more, and they know it full well.

The net neutrality argument is not only

The sum of human

about small business or licensing fees. It is about Sheng and Gutenberg, and all the moments of radical change that came about using the tools they first perfected a millennium ago. It is about what the internet is, and can be, so long as it remains open and free. The sum of human knowledge is our natural birthright; we made it, and should have access to it as we please. Those who believe otherwise are trying to steal our past and our future. They must not be allowed to succeed.

The FCC vote on eliminating net neutrality will take place on December 14. Use the time wisely and well. In the beginning were the words. They belong to you.

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