

BUILDING A MOVEMENT FOR NET NEUTRALITY

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- *How and why Change.org built a campaign to protect neutrality of the internet* •

ABSTRACT

Change.org's net neutrality campaign was launched in June of 2017, ahead of the United States' (US) Federal Communications Commission vote to end to the net neutrality protections put in place by the Obama administration in 2015. It marked the first time Change.org had launched their own petition in support of a policy issue and became a central place for people throughout the US to take action with over 2 million people signing the petition. This institutional reflection highlights how Change.org used its brand, and digital organising expertise to build a community of engaged net neutrality supporters.

KEYWORDS

Net neutrality | Campaign | Change.org



1 • Introduction

One of the most popular and contentious issues in the United States (US) over the last year has been net neutrality. Specifically, the debate has been centred around Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Chairman Ajit Pai's plan to end the net neutrality rules put in place by the Obama Administration.

Pai is a former attorney for Verizon and was designated chairman of the FCC by President Trump in January of 2017. Within one year he was able to get his proposal passed by the FCC in a 3-2 vote across party lines. In the year leading up to that vote, Change.org launched a digital campaign to drive petition signatures, FCC comments, and phone calls to members of Congress in support of keeping the protections in place.

2 • Background on net neutrality

Net neutrality is the principle that everyone has equal access and delivery of the things we use the internet for: sending emails, watching movies, streaming music, or signing petitions on Change.org. To enforce this, internet service providers (ISPs) like Verizon, Comcast, and AT&T were classified under Title II of the Communications Act by the FCC in 2015, which prevented them from blocking or censoring content, throttling apps, or creating paid "fast lanes" for those who can afford it.

FCC Chairman Ajit Pai's proposal sought to end net neutrality by reclassifying ISPs so they would not be subjected to such regulations. The change is concerning for many people, organisations, and companies who care about the internet being equally accessible to all. At Change.org, we were particularly concerned about the potential for a big cable company to block their consumers from viewing a website, an online petition for example, if they disagree with it (should it be directed at them, for example).

We frequently see petitions directed towards corporations asking them to change business practices, including ISPs. Jennifer Tyrrell, a Cub Scout leader who was kicked out of her troop because she was gay, successfully petitioned AT&T, whose chief executive officer sat on the Boy Scouts of America board, to urge the organisation to allow LGBTQ leaders and troops.¹ Nearly 200,000 people used a petition to convince Verizon to end early contract termination fees for victims of domestic violence who shared accounts with their abusers.² Thousands of consumers signed petitions opposing the attempted Comcast and Time Warner merger.³

Without net neutrality, those ISPs would have the power to block their customers from visiting those petitions or slow the delivery of websites run by the organisers behind them, significantly impacting petitions, fundraisers, and educational content. To be more explicit, the internet has provided marginalised communities like people of color, people with disabilities, or economically disadvantaged individuals with a platform to make their voices heard and to organise like nothing in history ever has. Ending net neutrality puts all of this at risk.

3 • Why net neutrality is important

Beyond the impact on free speech and censorship, net neutrality is important for innovation and small businesses because it provides an even playing field for start-up companies who are competing with already established corporations. This is where the issue of “paid fast” lanes comes in. This means Verizon or Comcast can decide to charge a company like YouTube or Amazon, or one of their smaller new competitors, for faster access to users. If your company can not afford to compete with Amazon or YouTube, you will end up in the slow lanes, effectively killing any chance of your company succeeding.

Last year, the Associated Press asked seven major ISPs if they plan to establish fast and slow lanes after the net neutrality rules were reversed and not a single company could rule out the possibility. So this concern is very real. Fight for the Future has been bringing together small businesses to put pressure on Congress about this and over 6,000 people have signed their letter.⁴

The end of net neutrality also has global implications. While the FCC may be an American commission deciding American policy, some countries who look to US for guidance or inspiration around policy could choose to follow this path. And because there is such a lack

of competition in the US between ISPs, it is quite possible that if fees for companies like Spotify or Amazon become more expensive here, that cost is likely to be passed on to the customer regardless of where they live.

Furthermore, the FCC's move will simply set us behind the European Union, which put in place strong net neutrality protections in 2015 that require companies to handle all internet traffic equally.⁵



4 • Change.org Campaign

Change.org is the world's largest online petition platform. We have over 200 million users around the world who use our free petition tools to start and sign campaigns for any issue they find important. We decided as a company that it was important to take a stance in support of net neutrality. We joined the Battle for the Net,⁶ a coalition of organisations who are truly the experts and pioneers on the fight to save net neutrality like Fight for the Future and Demand Progress,⁷ and we launched our own petition to the FCC and Congress – **the first time we've ever done this.**

It may sound odd that this is the first time Change.org has used our own tool to launch a petition, but as an open platform, we don't take positions on many issues. We believe that

is best left to the millions of people who use our site and that it is our mission to provide a free platform that empowers them to tell their own stories to make a difference in the world. At the same time, we recognise that as the world's largest online petition site, we cannot continue that mission if people do not have access to an open internet, free from censorship and we are particularly positioned to speak out about this.

We also know that our users value net neutrality. Large numbers of Change.org users have long demonstrated their interest and support for internet issues related to privacy, freedom, and censorship. Hundreds of thousands of them take action every year to protect those values dating back to 2011, when 130,000 people signed a Change.org petition to convince Electronic Arts to oppose The Stop Online Privacy Act (SOPA).⁸ In 2013, 180,000 signed Daniel Jabbour's petition to stop the Cyber Intelligence Sharing and Protection Act (CISPA).⁹ In 2015, almost 100,000 people joined a successful petition started by the Student Net Alliance to save net neutrality.¹⁰

On 12 July 2017 we participated in the internet-wide Day of Action organised by Battle for the Net,¹¹ alongside companies like Amazon, Kickstarter, Netflix, and Twitter. At this time, our petition had been signed by about 110,000 people. For the day of action, we put up a 24hr homepage banner, increased our social media engagement, and directed signers to contact their members of Congress using Battle for the Net call tool.

The day of action was likely the largest online protest in history – generating over 2 million comments to the Federal Communications Commission, millions of emails to Congress, and at least 100,000 phone calls to Congressional offices.¹² The attention also doubled the signature count on our petition. All in one day.

5 • FCC Vote

Pai's proposal was always controversial among Americans who largely support net neutrality even across political lines. Millions of comments were filed against Pai's plan but he ignored concerns from citizens and experts alike. Given the overwhelming concern from the public about Pai's approach, the FCC Chairman missed an opportunity to work toward a better, bipartisan solution, while carrying the real potential to hurt free speech on the internet at a time when organisations and individuals are building some of the most important and exciting movements in history.

As the FCC vote grew closer, our petition became one of the most central places for people to take action. The petition was massively popular on Twitter with many verified accounts sharing it. One of the biggest drivers of signatures was Khloe Kardashian tweeting it to her 25m+ followers.¹³ We kept signers engaged with email updates asking them to share the petition, tweet directly at the FCC and Ajit Pai, and to make phone calls to Congress.

6 • Soon our petition hit 2 million signatures

The team at Battle for the Net built a fantastic call tool powered by Twilio that we emailed to signers on multiple occasions for Congressional call-in days to add pressure on members of Congress to push back against Pai. If you have not used a call tool like this before it makes calling your representative incredibly easy. With a few clicks from your desktop or mobile, your phone is connected to your representative's office without ever dialing a number. The page provides a phone script to help guide your conversation. Not enough people contact their representatives so tools that make that process easier are incredibly important and this is definitely one of them. We drove upwards of 15,000 phone calls to Congressional offices using the Battle for the Net call tool.

Members of Congress then began interacting directly with the Change.org petition using our Decision Makers feature.¹⁴ We are the only petition platform that allows the people being petitioned, in this case Congress, to actually respond to the people signing the petition to them. These messages are sent directly from the member of Congress to the supporter and it is a unique experience for petition signers because it shows them that their message is being heard. Responses were submitted from Senator Cory Booker, Representative Zoe Lofgren, and Senator Ron Wyden amongst others – all encouraging signers to continue fighting for net neutrality.

On 14 December 2017, the FCC approved Pai's measure to remove net neutrality rules in a 3-2 vote. Doing so removes the Title II designation, preventing the FCC from putting tough net neutrality rules in place even if it wanted to. And, it turns out, the Republicans now in charge of the FCC really do not want to. The new rules largely allow internet providers to do anything. They can block, throttle, and prioritise content if they wish to. The only real rule is that they have to publicly state that they are going to do it.

7 • The fight is not over

The petition has grown to over 2.3 million signatures and we continue to keep these Change.org supporters informed and engaged. I send out a monthly newsletter that compiles news, calls to action, and information from our partner organisations. The main call to action has been pushing members of Congress to support a Congressional Review Act, a resolution introduced in late February by Senator Ed Markey (D-MA) that would reverse the FCC's decision if passed by Congress.

This resolution has gained significant support in both the Senate and the House but particularly in the Senate where only one more vote is needed. Fight for the Future has been instrumental in building support among members of Congress, including Republicans, to make this happen. Unfortunately, time is running out for the resolution to be passed.

Despite the frustrations of trying to win against the FCC, this has been a fun campaign

in the sense that the people and organisations we have been working with are incredibly passionate and knowledgeable. We were even approached by Burger King who explained that they would be producing a video about net neutrality. The video would take a comedic approach to educate people about what net neutrality is and the impact of the FCC decision. We loved the idea and agreed to have them make the call to action for their video be signing our petition. Within a day this video had millions of views on Facebook and our partnership was covered extensively in the media.¹⁵

8 • How states are taking action

The fight has now shifted more to the state level. Dozens of states are now aiming to pass their own protections for net neutrality through executive orders or legislation. A few have already succeeded including Montana and Oregon. Over 20 attorneys general have signed onto a lawsuit challenging the FCC's rules. That lawsuit was initiated in January by Attorney General of New York, Eric Schneiderman.

To adapt to this, we utilised our movements feature¹⁶ to encourage our petition signers to start and sign local petitions. A movement page allows for many people to launch their own petitions regarding the same issue in one place. It is especially great for distributed or localised campaign efforts where you want petitions started in every state, or even more locally, and allow constituents to directly put pressure on their representatives. A great example of this would be efforts to pass plastic bag bans at the country level. Having one big national petition does not make sense there but making it easy for people to start small petitions directed at the city council does. That is what we did for this issue and right now there is currently a Change.org petition started by someone in every state asking their lawmakers to protect net neutrality by passing legislation or joining the lawsuit against the FCC.

9 • Conclusion

In a historic vote in May 2018, the US Senate passed a resolution that seeks to reverse the FCC's plan to end net neutrality.¹⁷ The resolution must now be passed by the House of Representatives. Fight for the Future has been instrumental in building support among members of Congress, including Republicans, to make this happen. Time is running out for the House to pass the resolution.

This month we launched an "I support net neutrality" t-shirt campaign¹⁸ with proceeds going to fund an educational discussion panel about the state of net neutrality that we will livestream to our followers and share with people afterward.

If you'd like to get involved, sign our petition¹⁹ and also head over to Battle for the Net²⁰ and sign up there as well. Both places will provide you with up to date information and ways to take action. This fight is not over.

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