



COMMITTEE ON
ENERGY & COMMERCE
DEMOCRATS
RANKING MEMBER FRANK PALLONE, JR.

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Pallone Opening Remarks at Algorithms Hearing

“Our national dialogue is being curated by companies policing content”

Washington, D.C. – *Energy and Commerce Committee Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr. (D-NJ) delivered the following opening remarks today at a joint Subcommittees on Digital Commerce and Consumer Protection and Communications and Technology hearing titled “Algorithms: How Companies’ Decisions About Data and Content Impact Consumers.”*

The internet is home to some of the most important conversations taking place today. As internet companies find ways for Americans to communicate, our democracy should be stronger than ever. But as we all know, something else is going on. Our national dialogue is being curated by companies policing content, and the number of websites handling this traffic has consolidated to just a few key players.

The aim of internet platforms is monetizing web traffic, not public policy. Algorithms created for the purpose of increasing ad clicks is what ends up shaping what we see online and too often, this content is not an accurate reflection of the real world. Structural flaws built into the algorithms used to sort online content may result in racial and other bias in our news feeds. As diverse voices are squeezed out, bias increases even further. This is simply not acceptable and I look forward to hearing more today about what we can do about it.

Unfortunately, forces are at work here in Washington to make this problem worse. At every turn, we see efforts to give more power to gatekeepers either by eviscerating net neutrality and privacy or by picking favorite voices for preferred regulatory treatment.

Even now, as we hold a hearing to talk about mitigating bias on the internet, FCC Chairman Pai is planning to introduce more bias into the system. The net neutrality rules that he plans to destroy are the protections that ensure that we, the people, can decide for ourselves what we do and say online. Chairman Pai’s plan will fundamentally change the free and open internet as we know it.

Independent voices—those outside the mainstream—may be most at risk simply because they don't have an affiliation with the companies that run the internet.

Unfortunately, broadband companies have more than just financial reasons to obstruct access to independent content—it can also be political. Under Chairman Pai's plan, nothing stops those in power from pushing broadband companies to censor dissenting voices or unpopular opinions or to promote views they support. We are seeing more and more often how this administration is using its political might to pressure even large companies.

This is not a partisan point or even a political one. Jeopardizing the national dialogue should concern all of us. The dialogue that happens online is critical for our democracy.

Chairman Pai's move comes after this Congress acted earlier this year to wipe out our privacy and data security online. Under President Obama, the FCC adopted fair rules to protect the little guy—ask before collecting information, don't share it without consent, and take reasonable measures to safeguard it. But that was too much for Congressional Republicans, who voted to take away these protections and hand over consumers' data to big business.

Sadly, there is still more to come. Over this past year, the FCC has taken every step possible to ensure that Sinclair Broadcasting—already the largest owner of broadcast stations in the country—becomes even bigger.

These steps by the FCC fly in the face of the laws Congress put in place to protect local voices. We understand that diverse perspectives are critical for our communities and strengthen our democracy. Instead, the FCC is doing everything it can to allow one company to control what people hear no matter where they are in the country. That is simply not what we intended.

So I look forward to discussing ways to eliminate bias in our communications systems. We need to figure out how to wrest power over information from corporations and return it back to the people.

Thank you, I yield back.

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