New proposed Internet rules would strengthen corporate control, end “net neutrality”

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The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is set to propose new rules for the Internet that will allow companies to pay money to Internet Service Providers (ISPs) in exchange for preferential treatment. The move heralds a new age of the Internet in which large corporations will spend money to have their websites delivered via faster channels.

The FCC’s announcement comes a few months after federal courts struck down Internet neutrality laws. The principle of net neutrality asserts that the Internet is a “common carriage,” a legal concept that protects the right of the public to access basic services and infrastructure. “Common carriage” laws prevent companies that operate railroads, airplanes, telecommunication networks, and other essential services from giving privileged access to certain customers.

Under the new rules, which will be finalized in May, companies will be able to pay money to those who own the physical infrastructure of the Internet. In exchange, their web traffic will be placed on a data highway that will ensure quick delivery to the customer. Companies that stream large amounts of data, such as Netflix, Disney, and YouTube, are expected to pay tens if not hundreds of millions of dollars to prioritize their content.

The New York Times writes that the decision could “radically reshape how Internet content is delivered to consumers… For example, if a gaming company cannot afford the fast track to players, customers could lose interest and its product could fail.”

The FCC’s move enshrines a shift that companies have already begun to make. In February, Netflix announced that it had agreed to pay Internet service provider Comcast an undisclosed sum to create a direct link between their respective networks. This connection is supposed to give Netflix watchers who receive their Internet from Comcast access to a data highway that bypasses third-party servers that usually stand in the way. The *Washington Post* at the time wrote, “Comcast’s deal with Netflix makes network neutrality obsolete.”

The FCC protests that it is not “gutting the open Internet rule”. Chairman Tom Wheeler stated that the FCC is simply complying with the decision by the federal court earlier this year.

The details of the FCC’s proposal are not public; however, reportedly the FCC will require ISPs to disclose how they are treating their first-tier data-highway customers. According to FCC officials, ISPs will be required to bargain their deals “in a commercially reasonable manner.”

Michael Weinberg, Vice President of *Public Knowledge,* said, “The FCC is inviting ISPs to pick winners and losers online. The very essence of a ‘commercial reasonableness’ standard is discrimination… This standard allows ISPs to impose a new price of entry for innovation on the Internet.”

The destruction of net neutrality rules comes amidst the growing monopolization of the technology and communications industry.

Pending approval by the federal government, Comcast Corporation is staged to take over Time-Warner. Comcast is already, without the merger, the largest mass media and communications company in the world. Combined, the new goliath would control 38 percent of all cable networks within the United States.

Susan Crawford, a media professor, told National

Public Radio that “[Cable Companies] are extracting enormous rents, enormous profits, from what Americans perceive to be a basic service.” She noted that in foreign metropolises like Seoul and Stockholm, companies charge roughly $25 a month for Internet connections that are “100 times faster than the very fastest connection available in the United States.”

In addition to serving the profit interests of the telecommunication giants, an end to net neutrality is aimed ultimately at undermining the Internet as a platform for the free exchange of ideas. The goal is to try to transform Internet access into something more akin to cable television—in which content for most customers is effectively limited to channels controlled by large corporate conglomerates, often with close relationships to the state.