

WRITTEN STATEMENT OF
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HEARING ON:
THE FUTURE OF THE INTERNET

BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE
UNITED STATES SENATE
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Good morning Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, my name is Michele Combs, and I am the Vice President of Communications for the Christian Coalition of America. Thank you for inviting my organization to testify at this hearing on the "Future of the Internet."

The Christian Coalition of America is the largest and most active conservative grassroots political organization in the United States. We offer people of faith a vehicle to be actively involved in shaping their government. Christian Coalition of America is a political organization, which is made up of pro-family Americans who care deeply about becoming active citizens for the purpose of guaranteeing that government acts in ways that strengthen, rather than threaten, families.

Our hallmark work lies in voter education. Prior to the last election, the Christian Coalition of America distributed a record 70 million voter guides throughout all 50 states. These non-partisan guides gave voters a clear understanding of where various candidates stood on the issues important to them. With this knowledge, millions of voters went to the polls to make their voices heard.

Use of the Internet has allowed the Christian Coalition to amplify the voices of millions of hard-working, pro-family Americans in a way that has revolutionized their ability to be heard and to engage in the political process.

The Internet connects people all over the world in a manner, scope, and ease of use that would be impossible anywhere but online. It provides a voice for even the most modest members of society to disseminate ideas on a scale traditionally reserved only for the most powerful.

Consequently, the reason the Christian Coalition supports Net Neutrality is simple. We believe that organizations such as the Christian Coalition should be able to continue to use the Internet to communicate with our members and with a worldwide audience without a phone or cable company snooping in on our communications and deciding whether to allow a particular communication to proceed, slow it down, block it, or offer to speed it up if the author pays extra to be on the "fast lane."

Unfortunately, in the last six months, we have seen network operators block political speech, block content, and block the most popular applications on the Internet. In every instance, the network operators have claimed that these actions were for "network management" purposes.

Verizon Wireless Blocking Political Speech. Last fall, Verizon Wireless censored text messages sent by the pro-choice advocacy group, NARAL, to its own members who had voluntarily signed up to receive them. When NARAL protested, the phone company claimed the right to block any content "that, in its discretion, may be seen as controversial or unsavory." When this did not satisfy the concerned, Verizon

Wireless said not to worry, because the company would also block the speech of pro-life advocates such as the Christian Coalition.

After news of Verizon's censorship hit the front-page of the *New York Times* -- sparking a loud public outcry -- the company quickly backpedaled, issuing an apology and blaming the blocking on a "dusty internal policy," -- while still reserving the right to block text messages in the future at its own discretion.

AT&T Blocking Political Speech. In August 2007, AT&T censored a webcast of a concert by the rock band Pearl Jam just as lead singer Eddie Vedder started talking about politics. The company claimed it was a glitch -- as were at least three other instances when AT&T cut off political speech during live concerts.

Comcast Blocking Access to the King James Bible. In October 2007, the news organization Associated Press reported that Comcast was blocking consumers' ability to download the King James Bible using a popular file-sharing technology. Comcast at first denied that it was engaging in such discrimination. After independent tests confirmed that Comcast was indeed engaging in this behavior, Comcast claimed that it was simply conducting routine network management. This "routine network management" has launched two petitions at the Federal Communications Commission, a consumer complaint at the FCC, at least two class action lawsuits, an investigation by a state attorney general, and countless complaints in the blogosphere. Yet Comcast continues to argue it has the right to discriminate against such applications. It is my understanding that it now argues that the FCC has no legal authority to do anything about it. And, I understand that some cable companies have argued to the FCC that not even Congress has the Constitutional authority to protect consumers from such bad behavior.

It has also been pointed out that Comcast's discriminatory conduct just so happens to block access to video distribution applications from companies like Vuze that compete with Comcast's own programming.

If Comcast were to create a Christian family channel, would Washington allow it to block access to competing programming distributed through the Christian Coalition website?

While the cable companies complain to the FCC about their rights to "manage their network" without interference, I ask you to consider the speech and commerce rights of organizations like the Christian Coalition, NARAL, consumer groups, technology companies, and millions of users of the Internet.

I have heard the cable companies argue that network neutrality rules would prevent them from protecting consumers from child pornography and other illegal content. I am not a network engineer, but it is my understanding that every major net neutrality proposal, including legislation offered by Senators Dorgan and Snowe, would allow the network operators to block illegal content. No one I know opposes that.

It seems that the cable companies' argument that they are merely engaging in "legitimate network management" is disingenuous, and frankly it offends me. And I respectfully suggest that it ought to offend the Committee.

Right now, the cable companies are not subject to a network neutrality regulation, yet family groups continue to criticize the amount of pornography that cable companies make available on their systems and even profit from. Yet, the cable industry would have us believe that if you impose network neutrality rules, it will suddenly clean up the Internet?

Let's remember, it was the transmitting of the King James Bible that Comcast blocked, which caused the current controversy. It was not as if the company was trying to protect consumers from inappropriate content.

Why do you think that the pornography industry has not supported net neutrality? Arguably, any unsavory producer of content should be worried that its content could be disadvantaged in a non-neutral network. I suggest that the answer is that the pornography industry knows that it will be able to pay premium prices to be on the fast lane with exceptional quality of service provided by the cable industry.

You know who won't have the deep pockets to compete in this non-neutral world of special deals? Non-profit, family organizations like the Christian Coalition.

The Christian Coalition does not seek burdensome regulations. We generally believe that less government is better than more government. And, we do not believe that governments should censor speech. But let's be clear. Right now, the telephone and cable companies are investing in and using the exact same censorship and content discrimination technologies that are being used by the Chinese government to censor speech.

In fact, the Chinese government is currently using these same technologies to block the Christian Coalition's speech from being received by its citizens. The Christian Coalition is merely asking Congress to create simple rules of the road that make it clear that it will allow cable and phone companies to block the lawful speech rights of the Christian Coalition and others.

Increasingly, faith-based groups are turning to the Internet to promote their political rights, to engage in what Ronald Reagan called "the hard work of freedom." We should not let the phone and cable companies interfere with that work.