



Media Minutes

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Producers: Stevie Converse and Candace Clement

TRANSCRIPT

AT&T Scares Employees About Net Neutrality

On Thursday, the Federal Communications Commission proposed new rules protecting Net Neutrality – the fundamental principle that prevents Internet service providers from discriminating against online content and applications. The new rules are now open for public comment until March, after which the commission is expected to finalize them.

The FCC was hailed by consumer groups, Capitol Hill leaders and Internet companies.

But the run-up to the FCC meeting saw an intense lobbying effort by phone and cable companies to derail the new rule. The leader of that effort, chief AT&T lobbyist James Cicconi, went so far as to send a memo to the company's employees asking them to personally weigh in against Net Neutrality.

Alex Chasick is a blogger with The Consumerist, an online resource for consumer advice and issues.

Alex Chasick: *Consumerist -email box got a tip from a reader who was an AT&T employee saying that he had received this letter from the higher ups at AT&T, Jim Cicconi, their VP for legislative affairs, basically asking employees to use their personal e-mail addresses kind of obscuring that they work for ATT and to go on to the FCC's Net Neutrality Web site, openinternet.gov, and leave comments attacking Net eutrality. Saying, "I'm a citizen of the country and I oppose net neutrality for the following reasons." And of course, there is no real good reason to oppose net neutrality and so they provided talking points about how it's bad for ISPs and business and innovation and all of that.*

The talking points were quickly skewered by Chasick and others. The letter asserts, among other things, that Net Neutrality rules would exempt companies like Google while burdening a company like AT&T. But to compare an Internet Service Provider with a search engine or content provider like Google is mixing apples and oranges.

Alex Chasick: *These companies are controlling who can access content. They're the companies that consumers have to sign up with to be able to access a site like Google.*

Google provides the content, they don't necessarily provide the means to transmit or connect to the content.

AT&T's deceptive approach, which apparently did not derail the FCC, was criticized widely in the blogs and the press. And Chasick feels this is an issue that resonates clearly with consumers, too.

Alex Chasick: *The ISPs and the phone companies are really good villains. They really have just done such terrible things in customer service over the years. Stories of Comcast scheduling an installation and making you take a day off from work and they never show up and they bill you a cancellation charge for missing your own appointment. So I think the idea of these companies who can't even get their own techs out there on time dictating what you can and can't access just really infuriates people.*

You can read The Consumerist's blog at www.consumerist.org.

Bill to Preserve Public Access TV Now in Congress

Help may be on the way for beleaguered community television stations across the nation. Rep. Tammy Baldwin of Wisconsin has introduced a new bill in Congress, the Community Access Preservation Act of 2009, to help address some of the challenges faced by public, education, and government TV channels, collectively known as PEG channels.

Baldwin got involved after witnessing the decline of public access stations and services in Wisconsin following the passage of a statewide video franchising law.

She began working with the Alliance for Community Media as well as the National Alliance of Telecommunications Officers and Advisers.

Helen Soulé is the executive director of Alliance for Community Media. She says that what happened in Wisconsin is also happening across the country.

Helen Soulé: *There has been discriminatory treatment of PEG channels. They also are suffering with unnecessary limits on the use of PEG funds, that the PEG funds can only be used for capital costs as opposed to operational costs. Buying the equipment is certainly only one step in creating a center that serves the community. You need people and you need training and you need lots of things that the funds could not be used for.*

The Community Access Preservation Act – HR 3745 – allows franchising funds to be used for operational costs as well as capital costs. In addition, the bill calls for PEG channel quality, functionality, accessibility and placement to be equivalent to the video provider's local network affiliate commercial stations.

Helen Soulé: *Some have moved the PEG channels up to the 900's or, in effect, way away from the basic tier, which the intent of the law was always that these community media channels would where anyone who had the most basic of cable service could get them and could see them.*

The new bill would also make cable television-related laws and regulations applicable to all landline video providers. Currently, cable companies and other video service providers, like phone companies, are operating under different regulations.

Helen Soulé: *While there have been some rulings in some district courts saying that no, they are a cable service, we wanted to clarify it in the law that basically all video services delivered to the home over a wire would be defined as cable service.*

For more information about the Community Access Preservation Act, go to alliancecm.org.