VOICES FOR INTERNET FREEDOM

Centering Low-Income People and Communities of Color in the Fight for Digital Civil Rights
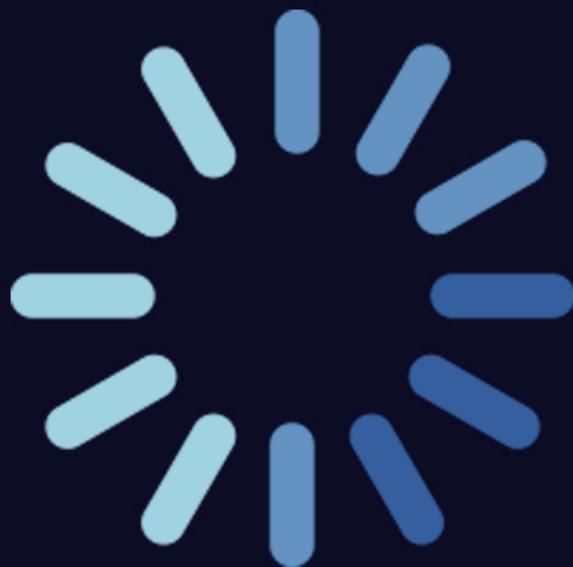
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History of Voices for Internet Freedom

Structural and institutional racism have historically shaped our nation's media and communications system. These dynamics have prevented people of color from leading newsrooms, owning broadcast outlets and telling their own stories. As a result, corporate news outlets often portray people of color using damaging stereotypes and tropes, fueling the cycle of racial oppression.

Fed up with this problematic landscape, a group of activists launched Latinos for Internet Freedom in 2010, followed by Black Voices for Internet Freedom in 2011. The coalitions merged in 2013 to form a multiracial alliance to ensure the voices of people of color are heard when it comes to policy decisions impacting their communities.

Today, the organizational partners leading Voices for Internet Freedom are the Center for Media Justice, Color Of Change, 18 Million Rising, Free Press Action and the National Hispanic Media Coalition.

Voices Milestones

- **Aug. 2010** — Latinos for Internet Freedom sends a letter to the FCC to urge the agency to pass strong and enforceable Net Neutrality rules.

- **Oct. 2010** — Latinos for Internet Freedom and the Media Access Grassroots Network file Net Neutrality comments with the FCC on behalf of more than 20 organizations.

- **Sept. 2011** — Black Voices for Internet Freedom is launched.

- **2013** — Latinos for Internet Freedom and Black Voices for Internet Freedom merge to become Voices for Internet Freedom.

- **Oct. 2013** — Voices hosts a public forum on government surveillance of communities of color following Edward Snowden's revelations.

- **Jan. 2014** — Voices hosts Oakland town hall with FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler, where community members share their stories on the impacts of an increasingly corporate media environment.

- **May 2014** — Voices calls on the FCC to abandon its pay-for-play open-internet proposal.

- **Jan. 2015** — A delegation of activists including Black Lives Matter co-founder Opal Tometi visits the FCC and Reps. Hakeem Jeffries, John Lewis and Maxine Waters to urge support for strong and enforceable Net Neutrality rules.

- **Feb. 2015** — Voices celebrates the historic FCC decision to reclassify ISPs as Title II services, giving the agency the authority to enforce newly adopted Net Neutrality rules that ban a pay-for-play internet.

- **Oct. 2015** — The FCC caps exorbitant costs of prison-phone calls, though the agency's subsequent leadership under Chairman Ajit Pai fails to defend its rules in court, which were struck down following a legal challenge.

- **April 2017** — Voices denounces Chairman Pai's plan to overturn the strong and enforceable Net Neutrality rules the Commission adopted in 2015.

- **May 2017** — Voices hosts the town-hall meeting "Connected Communities" with Commissioner Mignon Clyburn in Los Angeles' Skid Row neighborhood.

- **June 2017** — Voices hosts the town-hall meeting "Internet IRL" in Atlanta to discuss internet freedom in Black communities. Guest panelists include now-Georgia Rep. Lucy McBath, actress Reagan Gomez Preston and comedian Robin Thede.

- **Dec. 2017** — Voices hosts a "Wake Up Call" rally centering communities of color to protest the FCC vote to destroy Net Neutrality; the event features testimonies from lawmakers, activists, advocates and FCC commissioners.

- **March 2018** — Voices hosts a Capitol Hill briefing to discuss the FCC's Net Neutrality decision and Chairman Pai's plan to gut the Lifeline program, which subsidizes phone and internet access for low-income people.

- **May 2018** — Voices hosts a virtual town hall in honor of departing FCC Commissioner Mignon Clyburn, the first African American woman to serve on and chair the FCC; speakers thank Commissioner Clyburn for her service and discuss her legacy.

- **Sept. 2018** — Voices organizes a speakout outside FCC headquarters to protest the agency's effort to dismantle the Lifeline program.

Digital Civil Rights: Our Issues

Digital Divide

Disparities in broadband adoption—commonly known as the digital divide—stem not only from income inequality, but from institutional racial discrimination. Lack of affordability, insufficient competition, and structural racism are systematically creating barriers that prevent people of color and other vulnerable communities from accessing opportunities online.

"History shows us that building it is not enough. If we build it, they will not come, unless it's affordable. So we have to do both. An infrastructure-only solution is insufficient."
—Jessica J. González, Free Press Action

- This adoption gap exists between White people and people of color in all income strata, but the gap is largest among the poorest people in America.

- While 81 percent of Whites have home internet, only 70 percent of Hispanics, 68 percent of Blacks, 72 percent of American Indian/Alaska Natives, and 68 percent of Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders are connected at home.

- Only 49 percent of households with annual family incomes below $20,000 have internet in the home, compared to nearly 90 percent of households with incomes above $100,000.

- While only 18 percent of White households that have home internet connect via mobile only, 28 percent of both Hispanic and Black internet-connected homes connect using only mobile services.

- Black and Hispanic households without home internet are far more likely to cite affordability and far less likely to cite "don't want/don't need" than White households without access. For example, 39 percent of non-internet Hispanic households and 35 percent of non-internet Black households cite "can't afford it" as a reason for not subscribing, compared to just 21 percent of White households without internet.

These figures are excerpted from Free Press Action's 2016 report *Digital Denied: The Impact of Systemic Racial Discrimination on Home-Internet Adoption.*

Lifeline Subsidy Program

Lifeline, a program housed at the FCC, is the only subsidy available to low-income people to assist in affording essential communications services. Lifeline was created in 1985 for home telephone services, and expanded to mobile and broadband in 2016.

The program is crucial to ensuring that low-income families, the elderly, people with disabilities, people living on tribal lands, veterans, domestic-violence survivors, hurricane victims, and other vulnerable populations are able to have a phone or internet connection. Despite its enormous importance, the current FCC is contemplating a proposal that could potentially drop 70 percent of the program's current subscribers.

More information is available at sapelifeline.org.

"Seekers of justice use the internet today much like the civil-rights leaders of the 1960s used the telephone. As such, the threat of being blocked by gatekeepers is as real now as it was then.

Net Neutrality

A free and open internet, protected by strong Net Neutrality rules, is a place where people of color can tell their own stories and access information of their choosing without a gatekeeper standing in the way. Net Neutrality protects the public's right to freely assemble online without risk of internet service providers (ISPs) slowing down, discriminating against or blocking websites and content.

For people of color, who are consistently underrepresented and misrepresented in traditional media outlets, it is critical to have the unfettered ability to express themselves online, reach new business markets, pursue educational opportunities, organize across geographic boundaries and transform public opinion.

According to a 2018 University of Maryland poll, 82 percent of Republicans, 90 percent of Democrats and 85 percent of independents opposed FCC Chairman Pai's decision to take away Net Neutrality protections in December 2017. Not only did that decision remove rules that protected people from ISP blocking, throttling and discrimination, it also set aside the FCC's authority under Title II of the Communications Act to protect internet users from ISPs' future discriminatory, anti-competitive or anti-consumer behavior.

This is why it is so critical for us to carry the torch for robust open-internet protections, stand up for affordable broadband services and push back against those seeking to close the door."

— Former FCC Commissioner Mignon Clyburn

Data Privacy

According to a 2016 Pew Research Center report, nearly three-fourths of people in the United States feel that being in control of who has access to their data is very important. And 91 percent of consumers agree that they've lost control over how companies are collecting and using their personal information.

In 2014, Voices for Internet Freedom joined a diverse coalition of advocates in releasing a core set of Civil-Rights Principles for the Era of Big Data. These principles address the critical impacts of data privacy on civil rights and racial justice:

Stop High-Tech Profiling

New surveillance tools and data-gathering techniques that are capable of assembling detailed information about any person or group pose a heightened risk of profiling and discrimination. Clear limitations and robust audit mechanisms are necessary to make sure that if these tools are used in a responsible and equitable way, if at all.

Ensure Fairness in Automated Decisions

Computerized decision-making in areas such as employment, health, education and lending must be judged by the technology's impact on real people, must operate fairly for all communities, and in particular must protect the interests of those who are disadvantaged or who have historically been the subject of discrimination.

Protect Constitutional Principles

Search warrants and other independent oversight of law enforcement are particularly important for communities of color and for religious and ethnic minorities who often face disproportionate scrutiny. Government databases must not be allowed to undermine core legal protections, including those of privacy and freedom of association.

Enhance Individual Control of Personal Information

Personal information that is known to a corporation — such as the moment-to-moment record of a person's movements or communications — can easily be used by companies and the government against vulnerable populations, including women, the formerly incarcerated, immigrants, religious minorities, the LGBT community and young people. Individuals should have meaningful, flexible control over how a corporation gathers data from them, and how it uses and shares that data. Non-public information should not be disclosed to the government without judicial process.

Protect People from Inacurate Data

Government and corporate databases must allow everyone — including the urban and rural poor, people with disabilities, seniors and people who lack access to the internet — to appropriately ensure the accuracy of personal information that is used to make important decisions about them. This requires disclosure of the underlying information, and the right to correct it when it is inaccurate.

2019 Policy Priorities and Beyond

Bold action from Congress is necessary to ensure that our media future is one of justice and fairness. To that end, Voices for Internet Freedom has identified a number of policy priorities:

Stop the FCC's Proposed Vote to Gut the Lifeline Program

Lifeline is a federal program that was created to subsidize telephone connections for low-income people in the United States. Today, Lifeline is the only comprehensive and effective federal program to bridge the home internet-affordability gap. In recent years, the FCC has put forward several proposals to decimate Lifeline, including plans to cut off over 70 percent of Lifeline connections. Congress must call on Chairman Pai to shut down the current proposals that will destablize the program. Many of these plans to derail the effectiveness of Lifeline have been criticized across the ideological spectrum, by hundreds of organizations and companies, and by tens of thousands of people in the FCC docket.

Hold a Congressional Vote to Reinstate the 2015 Net Neutrality Order

The current FCC has failed its statutory duty to protect people from the danger of ISP blocking, throttling and discrimination, so it is time to restore open-internet rights. Any Net Neutrality legislation must restore the full protections of the FCC's 2015 Open Internet Order, account for Title II's affordability, competition, deployment, and privacy measures.

Reintroduce and Pass the Video Visitation and Inmate Calling in Prisons Act of 2017

Strong relationships between families and their incarcerated loved ones are pivotal to successful reentry into society. Unfortunately, prisons and jails across the country rake in profits by granting monopoly telephone contracts. This results in exorbitantly high prison-phone calling rates—according to the FCC, as much as $17 for a 15-minute phone call in 2014. Two out of three affected families must decide between meeting basic financial needs and speaking with their loved ones behind bars.

Recognizing this injustice as yet another way that mass incarceration punishes communities, Voices for Internet Freedom is urging the passage of legislation co-sponsored in 2017 by Sens. Tammy Duckworth, Cory Booker, Rob Portman and Brian Schatz. This measure would eliminate predatory inmate calling rates nationwide by restoring the FCC's authority to protect all consumers.

About the Coalition

Center for Media Justice | The Center for Media Justice (CMJ) was launched in 2008 to organize the most underrepresented communities into a national movement for media rights, access and representation. CMJ has its roots in the Youth Media Council (YMC), launched in 2002 to counter dangerous media stereotypes about California's youth of color in the news. Today, CMJ coordinates MAG-Net — the largest racial-justice network for media rights, access and representation in the United States, and remains a powerful network hub winning racial equity through media-policy change.

Color Of Change | Color Of Change is the nation's largest online racial-justice organization. We help people respond effectively to injustice in the world around us. As a national online force driven by more than 1.4 million members, we move decision-makers in corporations and government to create a more human and less hostile world for Black people in America.

18 Million Rising | 18MillionRising.org (18MR.org) brings Asian American communities together online and offline to reimagine Asian American identity with nuance, specificity and power. We utilize digital-first advocacy tactics to elevate the voices of and mobilize our over 120,000 members to take action on issues that matter to them. We create meeting places online where young Asian Americans can deliberate together about what it means to be Asian American in the 21st century.

Free Press Action | Free Press Action was founded in 2003 to give people a voice in the crucial decisions that shape our media. We challenge powerful corporations, hold policymakers accountable and mobilize more than 1 million members around issues including the free and open internet, the future of journalism, media control, privacy and surveillance. Our dynamic team delivers grassroots campaigns, groundbreaking research and direct advocacy in the fight for your rights to connect and communicate. We envision a media system that's open, affordable, democratic and safe for everyone — including people of color and others who stand up for justice.

National Hispanic Media Coalition | The National Hispanic Media Coalition (NHMC) is a 30-year-old civil-rights organization focused on expanding and securing digital rights for Latinos. For years, NHMC has submited comments with in-depth legal analysis to the FCC on behalf of Latinos on Net Neutrality. NHMC leads the Lifeline Coalition, a group of public-interest organizations working to defend the Lifeline program and close the digital divide. NHMC has also joined coalition efforts to oppose government-surveillance programs that monitor their communications, and continues to be an advocate for stronger internet-privacy protections in order to restore power to Latinos over their data online and the manner in which it is used. Other issues that NHMC focuses on include elimnating hate speech, restoring telecommunications in Puerto Rico, and increasing media diversity.

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