

**Committee on Energy and Commerce**  
**Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery**  
**of**  
**Full Committee Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr.**

*Hearing on “The Telecommunications Act of 1996: 30 Years Later”*

**March 26, 2026**

Thirty years ago, Congress – on a bipartisan basis – passed the Telecommunications Act of 1996. This landmark legislation sought to catapult the communications industry to the digital age by promoting the principles of competition, innovation and, importantly, universal connectivity – ensuring that all Americans have affordable access to advanced communications services, such as broadband. Congress also envisioned a media marketplace defined by competition, diversity of voices, and consumer choice.

In some respects, Congress got it right. The law helped fuel the Internet age as we know it, but there are still too many goals of that law that have not been met.

I am deeply concerned that with Brendan Carr as Chair of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the agency is moving further away from the goals Congress envisioned in 1996. Instead of delivering access to reliable and affordable broadband for all Americans, Chairman Carr has rolled back broadband price transparency requirements and taken steps to limit students’ ability to access Wi-Fi on school buses for homework.

Rather than preserving local and diverse voices, Chairman Carr is fighting First Amendment battles he can’t win and squeezing competition from the media market, undermining the very principles Congress set out to achieve in 1996. Chairman Carr seems to think his only role is to serve as President Trump’s lackey and target news outlets and broadcasters for exercising their First Amendment rights and not bending to the President’s will.

And last week’s decision by the FCC’s Media Bureau to approve the Nexstar/Tegna deal simply adds insult to injury. This decision, which is a favor to President Trump’s allies, was released in the dead of night and without a full Commission vote. And it is simply illegal because the 39 percent statutory cap on broadcast station ownership cannot be waived away without an act of Congress. This decision also paves the way for unprecedented media consolidation at both the national and local levels and undercuts the 1996 Act’s goal for a media market built on competition, localism, and a diversity of voices. There is also a lot of evidence that this wave of consolidation will lead to higher bills for consumers that subscribe to pay TV services. Yet again, another opportunity for the Trump Administration to drive up prices on hardworking American families.

At the same time, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) has delayed and undermined our country’s best shot to achieve universal connectivity and finally close the digital divide. The Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program represents the most well-funded effort to date to bring affordable, high speed internet

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service to every community in the nation. Yet, under the Trump Administration, NTIA has sought to redirect the BEAD Program in ways that were never intended by Congress. The Administration is effectively turning the BEAD Program into the Republican FCC's failed Rural Digital Opportunity Fund program – an outcome Congress specifically wanted to avoid.

Closing the digital divide also means ensuring Americans have the skills to use the internet. Yet, NTIA, under the Trump Administration, unilaterally and illegally stopped funding programs under the Digital Equity Act, which was a part of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. This Act funds programs that would help seniors, veterans, the disabled, and others learn the skills needed to fully participate in today's – and tomorrow's - digital economy.

My Democratic colleagues and I have repeatedly requested information and answers from NTIA about its management of the BEAD program, but their response was late and woefully inadequate.

Finally, while there is still more work to do to achieve the universal access Congress envisioned three decades ago, we are now experiencing another technological revolution driven by artificial intelligence. Unfortunately, Trump and Congressional Republicans are undermining our ability to protect consumers and ensure they are the real beneficiaries of this technology, not the victims. As AI seemingly becomes integrated into Americans' daily lives, Congress must implement guardrails and consumer protections before it's too late.

And with that, I yield back the balance of my time.