

Testimony of Ruth Livier before the Subcommittee on Communications and Technology of the Committee on Energy and Commerce, U.S. House of Representatives. At a Hearing Entitled: "Preserving an Open Internet for Consumers, Small Businesses, and Free Speech." February 7, 2019.

In 2014, I testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee on how net neutrality changed my life as a Hollywood entertainment professional. I shared that the open internet put worldwide distribution of media content at the fingertips of independent artists, like me. This gave us the unprecedented opportunity to tell our own stories, from our points of view, and to share them globally, without the financial and corporate gatekeeping roadblocks of traditional media. It empowered us to define ourselves. This matters because the media traditionally produced by Hollywood, tend to tell an incomplete and unbalanced narrative about U.S. society. Latinx communities are largely misrepresented, symbolically annihilated,¹ and/or positioned as peripheral characters in someone else's story. With net neutrality rules in place to ensure that internet access service would remain open, with low-barriers to entry, artists could actively participate in balancing Hollywood's irresponsible exclusions.

Net neutrality is the reason I went from approaching a traditional media executive for advice and being told, "Who are you for anyone to produce your show?" to, years later, becoming the first person to join the Writers Guild of America West via my work in digital media for a web series I produced based on that very same script. That executive, in the early 2000s, had not read my work. Their objections seemed to be based on the concept of a Latina-driven show written by someone with no track record. Who was I to think that anyone would take me seriously? How was I supposed to prove there was a market for my content? There was

¹ Michelle Caswell, "Seeing Yourself in History: Community Archives and the Fight Against Symbolic Annihilation," *The Public Historian* 36, no. 4 (November 2014): 26–37, <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2014.36.4.26>.

no way in. Not until years later: when camera equipment was no longer cost-prohibitive and the exciting new frontier of the open internet allowed the rest of us, regardless of ethnicity or socio-economic standing, to finally tell our stories without getting discouraged, derailed, or turned away.

Net neutrality is about ensuring that traditional media's exclusionary practices are not transferred and amplified by broadband providers. It is about who has the power to control narratives and thus shape perceptions and perspectives. This has significant impacts on society. For marginalized communities, our representation—or lack thereof—can be a matter of life or death. When we are dehumanized in the media, it makes it easier for immoral individuals and groups to justify their targeted aggressions against us. A neutral internet empowers us to virtually walk arm-in-arm—with the confidence of knowing that our voices matter and we are not alone, that we are not invisible, and that our experiences are not isolated.

In the summer of 2018, for example, a group of Latinx entertainment media colleagues and I formed a group to rally against the cruelty of family separations. Because of net neutrality we were able to learn about the crisis from a variety of online sources and viewpoints. Brave journalists, activists, and whistleblowers exposed the injustices that were and continue to be perpetuated on brown men, women, and children at our southern border. The open internet allowed us to organize and to join forces to pushback against this administration's inhumanity. Some of our actions included creating media and fundraising to help victimized families.

As a Latina who has grown up in a low-income family where English is our second language, I have first-hand experiences of how much you have to juggle just to stay afloat and how mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausting it can be to navigate daily and persistent forms of oppression. The system is so relentlessly stacked against you that it seems so much

easier to give up, tune out, put your head down believe the myth “that’s just how things are, and there is nothing we can do.” Social inequities, however, are social constructs. They have been structured to serve particular purposes, helping some and harming many other human beings in very real and personal ways. Net neutrality is a ray of light that can put us on a path to bridging some of these inequities by affording us the option to make ourselves visible and our voices heard in the digital arena.

This policy is also about protecting our ability to have access to job opportunities, since more and more jobs are being—partially or fully—migrated onto the digital space. This is true for me, as an actress. Some of my jobs now take place in this digital arena. As a UCLA doctoral student in the department of Information Studies, this is within the area of my research. Taking a cue from my academic advisor, Dr. Sarah T. Roberts, whose groundbreaking work in digital labor and Commercial Content Moderation has brought these laborers and their working conditions out of the shadows, my research sheds light on the relationship between the exclusionary structures of traditional media and the exploitation of human beings who are doing creative work in digital environments.² My ability to do this research would be significantly hindered without net neutrality; without access to diverse viewpoints and within such a mediated and corporate-facing environment.

These are some of the immediate ways in which net neutrality empowers me as an entertainment professional, as a first-time activist, and as a student researcher. A few powerful internet service providers should not be entitled to mediate our voices, to frame discourses in order to serve their interests, nor to decide who or what is “worthy” of being visible or invisible in our society, and under what conditions. Net neutrality impacts human beings in very real

² Sarah T. Roberts, “Content Moderation,” in *Encyclopedia of Big Data*, ed. Laurie A. Schintler and Connie L. McNeely (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 1–4, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-32001-4_44-1.

ways, every single day. It impacts our ability to participate in society, to make a living, to connect with our loved-ones, to earn an education, and to collaborate in pushing back against social inequities. Market discourses serve the market and are designed to keep our conversations within certain parameters. I am here to participate in highlighting the human impacts of net neutrality because things look different from a human perspective.