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# Net Neutrality: Why Artists and Activists Can't Afford to Lose It

By W. KAMAU BELL OCT. 31, 2017

Somewhere at a comedy club, a new comedian is about to hit the stage for the first time. She will bring with her the modern tool of the trade: her cellphone, equipped with the notes she has typed, a recording app, and five minutes of material that isn't worth all that technology. This set is going to bomb. Hard. But she will repeat this process — night in, night out, until over time, that five-minute performance becomes tighter and more polished. Eventually, she'll ask a friend to use a phone to record a set. And that night she will kill. Utterly destroy the room. That will be the first time she uploads footage of herself performing to the internet. Her life will never be the same.

O.K., maybe things won't change for her overnight, but you get my point. Suddenly her material will be available to the world. Whenever anyone wants to see her set, boom! It's right there on the internet. Anyone — her friends, bookers, fellow comedians or maybe just millions of strangers — can search for it or stumble upon it. They can hit “play” and the set will immediately begin and run as seamlessly as it did that night at the comedy club. If this happens frequently enough (and it does), then her life and career will change. Then she gets the ultimate break: being invited to do the same set on “The Ellen DeGeneres Show.” Instant fame.

This kind of thing has happened, countless times. And not just to comics but also to magicians, singers and people who were embarrassed on camera but managed to monetize their shame. It will happen again. But it may not happen much

longer if the chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, Ajit Pai, follows through on his plan to roll back the network neutrality rules that ensure that anyone who puts something on the internet has a fair shot at finding a life-changing audience.

The current rules, which have been in place since 2015, ensure that internet service providers treat all data — websites, shows, emails — the same. That means nobody has to pay extra money to make sure his or her content loads quickly. This fair internet, where everyone from an amateur comedian to a celebrity to a huge media company plays by the same rules, means you don't need a lot of money or the backing of someone with power to share your content with the world.

To understand how consequential this is, imagine a young woman walking into the HBO offices and saying, "Hi, I'm an awkward black girl and I think I have some pretty hilarious misadventures that you should make into a TV show!" HBO's only question probably would have been, "How did you get in here?" Now picture this: "Hi, I'm Issa Rae. I have hundreds of thousands of YouTube subscribers and hundreds of millions of YouTube views. And I'm an awkward black girl." HBO's question: "When can you start?" I'm exaggerating. But only slightly. Issa Rae started the web series "The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl" on YouTube in 2011. Thanks in large part to its success, six years later, her comedy series, "Insecure," is set to air for a third season on HBO. It's hard to imagine this happening in a world without net neutrality.

Net neutrality is crucial to the careers of comedians like Ms. Rae and me, but it also allows content about more serious subjects to find an audience, without the endorsement or approval of traditional media gatekeepers.

When the activists Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi and Patrisse Cullors started using the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter to discuss the killing of the unarmed black teenager Trayvon Martin, it began trending worldwide, eventually anchoring the modern movement against police brutality against African-Americans. It's a reminder that the people providing the sharpest and most current analysis are often not employed by major media. This is still the case: Puerto Rico recovery updates? I'm going with @RosaClemente. Insightful takes on diversity in Hollywood? @ReignOfApril has

them all. Weirdly perfect gifs and memes to make it through the daily news about the Trump administration? @ParkerMolloy has got me every time.

Thanks to our current net neutrality rules, when people like this take their genius beyond Twitter, to the rest of the internet, they don't have to worry about whether it's in a pay-to-play internet "fast lane" that makes access to certain types of content easier. They're in the same lane as everyone else, because net neutrality means there can be only one lane. ISPs can't do anything to stand between them and the people they want to speak to, and we all benefit.

The exchange of information and ideas that takes place on the internet is more important now than ever. To protect it, we need to keep the current net neutrality rules in places. We need them to ensure that people working to make the world better can reach their intended audiences. We need them to ensure that artists everywhere continue to have a platform through which we can discover their work. Right now, the internet is a level playing field. The question the Trump administration needs to answer is: Why would you want to change that?

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