

FCC: Full speed in reverse

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC), like most other federal agencies, is moving in a very different direction under the new leadership in Washington—and at an unprecedented speed. Within two weeks of starting his new position as chairman of the FCC, Ajit Pai took several actions that reverse gains made in recent years.

Pai dealt a first blow to network neutrality—the principle that Internet service providers (ISPs) should enable access to all content and applications without favoring or blocking particular services or websites. The FCC decided to close investigations into whether wireless ISPs “zero rated” data plans violate protections under the 2015 Open Internet Order.

As more of our digital lives are lived via mobile broadband, library, and higher education groups fought for network neutrality protections to be applied equally to fixed and mobile broadband. Favoring affiliated digital content by excluding it from mobile broadband data caps raise significant questions related to network neutrality principles that should have been addressed through investigation. Advocates for network neutrality expect this to be the first of many attacks on net neutrality.

Another backward move came to the Lifeline program, which now provides discounted broadband service to eligible low-income people. Despite statements he made last year emphasizing his commitment to digital empowerment, Pai revoked the designations of nine companies recently approved

as Lifeline Broadband Providers (LBP). In response to a flood of protest from public interest groups, he defended the decision in a public statement, citing objections to the process by which the companies had been granted designations as LBPs.

Will the FCC put all LBP applications on hold for months or years, or will it move swiftly to address any concerns that the chairman has raised?

Also of concern to library professionals and other advocates for access to government information, Pai ordered the retraction of several recent reports. Among them were the “E-rate Modernization Progress Report” and “Improving the Nation’s Digital Infrastructure,” both of which have since disappeared from the FCC’s website. These actions undermine the credibility of the FCC and Pai’s recent move to increase transparency of the commission’s rulemaking by circulating to the public proposals to be considered at future commission meetings.

ALA is greatly concerned by recent FCC actions to reduce digital opportunity and revise the public record and is speaking out. We believe the FCC should build on years of work and public engagement to make broadband work better for all Americans, rather than turn back the clock. Library advocates can help in several ways:

- stay informed via District Dispatch blog;
- sign up for Action Alerts from ALA’s Office of Government Relations, so we can reach you quickly when direct action is needed;
- share your stories, blog, and engage on social networks about the importance of network neutrality and the need to defend it; and
- participate in National Library Legislative Day—either in Washington, D.C., or online—May 1 and 2. *✍*

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