

Redwood City officials
confront infrastructure
vulnerabilities after cros...

Trump admits he based
deporation of Kilmar Abrego
Garcia on picture that i...

TECH

How Republicans plan to pollute the net neutrality debate with Big Tech gripes

This isn't the first time, either.



Andrew Wyrich

Updated on February 8 2021 5:11 pm CST



Shutterstock (Licensed)

With Democrats taking control of the presidency and Congress, it quickly became clear that reinstating [net neutrality](#) is [a real possibility](#).

But as pressure begins to ramp up on [Biden to act on tech policy](#), Republicans are trying to throw a wrench into the debate by poisoning the net neutrality discourse with their gripes about alleged censorship and perceived bias on social media.

[Fox Business](#) reports that GOP strategists are suggesting trying to extend net neutrality rules—which ensure that internet service providers (ISPs) don't block, throttle, or offer paid prioritization and generally treat all internet traffic equally—to edge providers as a way to push back against alleged bias.

Edge providers are those [who offer content](#), like a social media platform. Net neutrality rules passed by the FCC (and later states) focus on the conduct of the providers of internet access, not edge providers.

Republican strategists interviewed by Fox Business recognized that any net neutrality legislation including their gripes about Big Tech was unlikely at best.

However, despite those slim chances, it appears that they want to pollute the net neutrality debate with these arguments anyway.

"If Democrats want to talk about net neutrality, they're going to have to include Big Tech," a former FCC official told Fox Business. "It has to be a holistic conversation."

A perceived bias against conservatives has become a major talking point in Congress and has served as the crux of [one side of the debate](#) around Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act. Given the [dizzying amount of back-and-forth](#) surrounding Section 230, it's perhaps not shocking that the debate would spill over into other—completely separate—tech policy discussions like restoring net neutrality.

While net neutrality has [bipartisan support among Americans](#), its been a (mostly) different story in Congress, with [nearly all](#) Democrats in support of the rules and [most](#) Republicans against it. By injecting the "censorship" gripes into the net neutrality discourse, it could distract from the [FCC reinstating the rules](#) or smear a bill [making its way through Congress](#).

"The attempt to muddy the difference between the people we pay to get online and the services that people visit online has been going on for a pretty long time," Ryan Singel, an open internet fellow at the Center for Internet and Society at Stanford Law School, told the Daily Dot. "The ISPs, the AT&Ts, the Comcasts of the world have been trying to do this for a long time as a way to see if they can deflect net neutrality protections from being imposed on them—'what about Google, they're more powerful than us?'— That's gained credence with a number of folks on the right who like now are more interested in what can we do to regulate online companies and impose some weird version of the fairness doctrine on online platforms, services, and companies in a way that is somewhat mindboggling."

Singel added that the same people who "screamed about government control of the internet" in the run up to the FCC's 2015 net neutrality order—Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas) infamously [called it](#) "Obamacare for the internet"— are now "supportive of proposals to have some government agency decide whether or not a platform is being fair to all political persuasions."

"There's definitely a growing political movement to either remove some liability protections around [Section 230] or break them up, so trying to hitch your anti-net neutrality train to that totally makes sense as a political strategy, though it is ideologically incoherent," Singel said.

But this isn't the first time that Republicans have tried to mix their complaints about edge providers with net neutrality.

During hearings for the [Save the Internet Act](#)—a bill that passed in the House of Representatives in 2019 that would have essentially codified the FCC's 2015 Open Internet Order that established net neutrality rules—former Rep. [Greg Walden](#) (R-Ore.) [brought up](#) whether edge providers should be classified as "common carriers" under [Title II of the Communications Act](#), which the 2015 Open Internet Order did for ISPs.

The Save the Internet Act [passed the House](#) in April 2019, but never came up for a vote in the Republican-controlled Senate, despite [multiple attempts](#) by Democrats to force one.

But in the House hearing, Walden went through a number of talking points—like how Title II regulation was from the 1930s and how the “internet seems to be working” in the wake of the FCC’s net neutrality repeal—before saying that the committee shouldn’t be talking about net neutrality, but another “crisis.”

“The internet seems to working today,” Walden said in March 2019. “Despite all the hyperbolic rhetoric to the contrary last year. So what internet crisis brings us to the hearing room today? It’s certainly not the abuses of the tech platforms that occupy the news everyday. Not the limiting of conservative voices on social media: shadow banning and throttling and things of that nature.”

He continued, bringing up Section 230:

“Meanwhile, big tech companies want complete freedom, not just from regulation but also from liability for facilitating all sorts of harmful and illicit activity ... When will this subcommittee seriously consider the role of edge providers, either as common carriers in the information age or how they are the ones with business models that actually use our data for their profit? If you’re going to protect consumers online, should those online protections apply to the whole internet ecosystem?”

Even former FCC Chairman Ajit Pai conflated edge providers with the net neutrality debate in 2017 ahead of the agency’s repeal of the rules. He brought up Twitter moderating “conservative users’ accounts” in a speech before a conservative think tank just before the agency was set to repeal net neutrality.

According to the [Washington Post](#), Pai said: “When it comes to a free and open internet, Twitter is part of the problem. The company has a viewpoint and uses that viewpoint to discriminate.”

He added: “This conduct is many things but it isn’t fighting for an open internet.” The speech was in the context of defending the upcoming net neutrality repeal, the Post reported at the time.

In a more recent interview with [CNBC](#), Pai said he would support legislation that outlawed blocking and throttling, but not under Title II (a [common sentiment shared by many Republicans](#)). He also said he wanted to see “the principles of openness applied through legislation to all areas of the internet, beyond just ISPs,” according to the news outlet.

The foundations of arguing about conservative “censorship” on social media—which is already [dubious at best](#)—while discussing net neutrality, which focuses on providers, have been clearly laid out. With net neutrality restoration looking like a real possibility under Democratic control, it looks like that argument may be again kicked into high gear, as the Fox Business report shows.

Even though their efforts may not end up gaining any traction, it appears that any potential net neutrality hearings in Congress or the FCC may be littered with talk from Republicans about alleged bias and censorship—like so many other hearings ostensibly about other things the party has chosen to muck up.

MORE IN TECH



Redwood City officials confront infrastructure vulnerabilities after crosswalk signal breach targeting tech billionaires goes viral



Trump admits he based deportation of Kilmar Abrego Garcia on picture that isn't real



EXCLUSIVE: Conservative PAC raked in donations from Hindus—then trashed them after the checks cleared



'We need a new flood': Lindsey Graham tells Catholics to get behind Trump for Pope push

Share this article



TAGS NET NEUTRALITY

First published: Feb 8, 2021, 8:46 am CST



Andrew Wyrich

Andrew Wyrich is the newsletter editor at the Daily Dot. He previously served as the deputy tech editor. Andrew has written for USA Today, NorthJersey.com, and other newspapers and websites. His work has been recognized by the Society of the Silurians, Investigative Reporters & Editors (IRE), and the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ).