

Save the Internet: How Students and Student Affairs Can Get Involved

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Introduction

Democratic participation requires a well-informed citizenry. In the current media system in the United States, however, giant corporations, public relations firms, and governmental regulations driven by private interests control the majority of the information citizens receive (Bugeja, 2005; McChesney, 2004; Streich, 2000). This equates to a kind of censorship that limits the establishment of a citizenry that analyzes, questions, and dissents—the very active participation required in a democracy. What results is a population of passive consumers who are uninformed about the media legislation that affects them, and are not encouraged to actively participate in the media they consume (Free Press, n.d.).

In contrast to the passive and controlled nature of mass media, the Internet represents a frontier of free speech and active involvement. It provides a neutral space for active expression through blogs, zines, as well as Indymedia (Stengrim, 2005), a collective of citizen journalist sites. The Internet also provides opportunities for active community building through social networking sites, such as Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube, which are ubiquitous among today's college students. The survival of these online outlets, however, requires an Internet that is free from corporate control, i.e. network neutrality. Without net neutrality, access to information could be restricted, non-mainstream choices could be severely limited, and freedom of expression could be stifled.

Although the idea of a corporate takeover of the Internet seems alarmist, recent news about Comcast's blocking of legal popular video, photo, and music sharing applications (Svensson, 2007) shows that Net neutrality is a real and critical issue. Clearly, educating students about media reform and Internet freedom is integral to preparing students for active citizenship in a democracy, which has long been seen as a primary purpose of higher education (Hamrick, 1998). The purpose of this article is to explore Net neutrality issues by a) introducing an activist organization that focuses on saving the Internet, and b) discussing how student affairs professionals could encourage students to become active participants in this campaign.

Saving the Internet

The average student logging onto the Internet makes these assumptions: Accessing any Website, whether corporate or homegrown, will be easy and fast, and all online services will be available anytime. Free Press (n.d.), a national, nonprofit, nonpartisan media activist organization, argues that what makes these assumptions possible is Net neutrality, which guarantees free speech and non-discrimination online. To effectively work toward ensuring a future of Net neutrality, Free Press developed a campaign in 2006 called *Save the Internet*, which is a coalition of hundreds of non-profit organizations, including the American Civil Liberties Union, MoveOn.org, and the American Library Association, as well as small businesses, and individual activists.

Free Press, based in Florence, Massachusetts and Washington, D.C., is helping to redefine activism by utilizing the unparalleled communication capabilities of the Internet. Co-founded by author, professor, and media scholar Robert W. McChesney in 2002, Free Press has grown dramatically in the past two years primarily by motivating the masses via news feeds, blogs, YouTube videos, and groups on Facebook and MySpace. Although Free Press does not provide designated site space or host organized communities for students, the importance of which is discussed later, the MySpace and Facebook groups provide effective communication channels with student activists because of the extensive use of these sites among university students (Haas, 2006). The groups on these online outlets are huge: over 7,000 members on Facebook.com, and approximately 23,000 members on MySpace.

Despite their power in numbers, clearly this coalition is up against some tough competition. With well-financed lobbying campaigns, the “broadband barons” are urging Congress to favor a “pay for pipes” decision, that is, a decision that would give cable and telephone companies the power to charge fees for faster Internet downloading time. This seems absurd, but AT&T CEO, Ed Whitacre, told *BusinessWeek* that the idea of “Google or Yahoo or Vonage or anybody to expect to use these pipes [for] free is nuts!” (O’Connell, 2005). This verdict could have devastating effects on Net neutrality because non-corporate, political, and citizen journalist Websites could not afford to pay high rates for faster downloading, as compared to corporate sites such as CNN.com or Time.com.

The most recent cause of *Save the Internet* is halting Comcast’s attack on Net neutrality, as mentioned above. The *Save the Internet* coalition has joined legal specialists in order to take the Comcast case to the FCC. *Save the Internet* and coalition partner Public Knowledge have lodged a complaint that “asks the FCC to fine Comcast \$195,000 for every affected subscriber” (Save the Internet, n.d., p.#). This particular cause has taken center stage on the Facebook and MySpace communities. A third community, Free Press’s *Action Network*, shows individual activists how to become involved with the Comcast and other media reform causes. The *Action Network* is a network of activists that educate about Net neutrality and media reform through blog posts, and again through groups on Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube. The *Action Network* also provides activist tools and an events calendar that lists related media reform conferences and workshops around the country. Some of these offer activist opportunities for high school and college students such as the recent “No News is Bad News” symposium sponsored by the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities. This event, held at Boston College in November, offered a special pre-session for high school journalists.

Opportunities for Student Affairs Professionals

The above discussion demonstrates the hard work undertaken by Free Press and its coalition partners to ensure a future of Net neutrality, among other important media reform issues. The constantly updated information and practical materials provided by Free Press help educate and propel citizens to take action and speak up for media reform. While the efforts of Free Press and its numerous coalition partners are clearly commendable, there seems to be room for growth, especially in the area of student participation.

Reaching out to students on a much larger scale through student conferences and leadership training would help educate this generation about important media reform issues, such as the *Save the Internet* campaign. This, however, is no easy task. West (2004) claims that current students have “hardly a sense of their history, little grasp of what shapes them, and no vital vision of their human potential” (p. 176). This new generation of students is inarguably over-mediated and material-minded, but they are also more engaged and active, even though their activism is less radical, less defensive, and more local (CIRCLE, 2007). Higher education institutions are in a position to nourish that engagement and expand student activism to a national level. By teaching and reinforcing democratic participation, higher education can generate a better-informed citizenry (Badley, 2005). Student affairs

professionals could bridge the gap between social activism and higher education by developing outreach programs for and establishing alliances with activist organizations like Free Press and many of its coalition partners.

Educators could encourage Free Press to develop a third campaign branch within the organization to spark a campus media reform movement. This branch could have its own action center, educational materials, and recruitment information for students interested in leading a media reform movement on their campuses. The annual National Conference for Media Reform, hosted by Free Press, would make an excellent opportunity for student leaders and student affairs professionals to meet with media policy experts and scholars to examine how higher education institutions can help educate and motivate students to learn about these issues and become active, rather than passive, consumers of media.

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