

# The internet is giving a voice to those on the margins – losing net neutrality will take it away

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Credit: kalhh

It's easy to argue that the internet as it exists now is not "neutral", with some companies and websites creating tech empires and online monopolies. But the decision of US telecoms watchdog, the Federal Communications Commission, [to remove regulations that overtly guarantee net neutrality](#) – the basic principle that all information on the internet should be treated equally and should be equally accessible – will

certainly not improve matters.

By removing the [net neutrality](#) regulations passed in the US in 2015, the balance is tipped in favour of those companies who are able to pay internet service providers and telecoms companies to prioritise the transfer of their data. This is not just a hypothetical position experts theorise might happen: it is already happening in countries such as [Guatemala](#) where net neutrality norms have been undermined, with [internet access](#) provided in tiers that offer different speed of access for a different monthly fee.

The economic implications of this and what it means for smaller or innovative companies in a competitive marketplace are clear. But there are other [hidden victims](#) of a failure to protect net neutrality and deter the monopolisation of the internet. To find them, we must make a short detour into media theory.

## **The knowledge gap**

In 1970 Philip Tichenor, George Donohue, and Clarice Olien proposed the influential [Knowledge Gap Hypothesis](#), which in essence suggests that as the amount of mass media grows, consumers from a higher socio-economic background tend to acquire this information at a faster rate than those from a lower socio-economic background, and so benefit more from it. They suggested this happens for various reasons, including often being the target of this media, and having easier access to it. This means that, despite the apparently egalitarian potential of access to information enjoyed by people from across the socio-economic spectrum, in fact access to knowledge alone may not address socio-economic disparities – and may even exacerbate them further.

Five years later the same authors [refined these ideas](#), suggesting ways to reduce this potential [knowledge gap](#): media focused on events and issues

that directly affect local communities, for example, or media that addressed forms of social conflict, and that dealt with shared issues and concerns.

Other factors have since helped close the knowledge gap – most notably access to the internet, described as a "[tool for creating a more informed citizenry](#)" by US academics Elizabeth Corley and Dietram Scheufele, and the rise of [social media](#). At the same time, disparity of internet access based on income is quickly shrinking: [recent data](#) shows internet use among those earning under US\$30,000 a year increased from 54% in 2008 to 79% in 2016, catching up those earning over US\$75,000, who have stayed at a steady 95-97% over the same period.

In many ways, the internet fulfils the aim of reducing the knowledge gap by creating an environment through which communities can come together to [discuss shared interests](#). It doesn't just provide access to news and information, but offers a means to take part in [shaping the narratives](#) and pushing for [direct action](#). The internet has provided the means to [allow communities to develop](#), and use social media to reflect their needs and concerns.

## **Not all knowledge is useful**

But, as has become clear recently, other factors affect the degree to which the general public is well informed. The rise of "fake news", disinformation, and fringe beliefs such as flat-Eartherism, now distributed with ease through social media, has left the public potentially more confused than ever. The Pew Research Center reports that [64% of Americans](#) are confused even to the basic facts of current events, which suggests that although internet access is a useful tool, we cannot assume that the information received is always correct, neutral, or beneficial. As was the case with much of the fake news spread during the 2016 US presidential election of Donald Trump, this disinformation can often be

[targeted at those from a specific socioeconomic background.](#)

Given this, it's questionable whether the internet has indeed reduced knowledge gaps, or if it has opened new divides in how and what we understand in a post-truth world. Nonetheless, any attack on net neutrality is likely to further restrict who has access to what information, and at what cost. The social impact of this could easily drive a wedge into and reopen any remaining knowledge gap, undoing some of the benefits achieved so far.

## **Which voices are amplified online?**

The internet has, to an extent, amplified voices from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, and it's vital that rolling back net neutrality doesn't erode what inroads these less-heard voices have made against the socio-cultural norm. Knowledge on the internet is already problematic. For example, much of Wikipedia is written by [white males](#) from the [global north](#), despite being seen as a repository of "the world's knowledge".

Spaces for a greater range of voices to take a role in shaping the knowledge available online must be created – not reduce access to only those who can afford it on platforms that pay for quicker access. A tiered internet that is tied to the ability to pay will likely further minimise the diversity of voices online.

There is every chance, looking at the examples of countries that have already removed net neutrality, that websites given faster and easier access will be sites from tech giants such as Facebook and Twitter – companies that have the commercial clout to achieve preferential arrangements with internet providers and telecoms firms, but which often do not reflect or protect disenfranchised communities. Facebook, for example, has nominally added more than two options for gender

classification, yet [research](#) suggests the platform still classifies all users by a gender binary. Similarly, Twitter's continued failure to effectively deal with abuse including, but not limited to, [racism and misogyny](#) means the site, by design, does not afford the same voice, freedom, or protection to all users.

These popular platforms have a long history of ignoring, mistreating or misrepresenting at-risk communities. Given that they already account for a huge proportion of internet use, it is likely that with the removal of net neutrality, [mistreated communities will continue to be marginalised](#). Similarly, if we slow down, target and punish local blogs and sites aimed at local news and specific communities we potentially undo the conditions through which the internet has lessened knowledge gaps.

There is a long way to go in order to ensure the [internet](#) is a space where people from diverse backgrounds are able to [access](#) and contribute to knowledge. But removing net neutrality is a step backwards, and will only serve to further silence disenfranchised communities, and reverse the positive steps so far taken to close the [knowledge](#) gap.

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