

STATE OF THE NET



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04 Keynote with Senator Edward Markey

Sen. Edward Markey (D-MA): I'm delighted to be here today, with so many luminaries of the Internet Policy area, to discuss the current state of the Internet. State of the Net always puts on a great event, and this year is no different. Today's agenda is chock full of interesting keynotes and panels.

The Internet was built on a radical idea that anyone, anywhere, could share information, organize communities, access knowledge freely. It was supposed to be an equalizing force, a public good that fosters free speech, encourages democratic participation, expands economic opportunity. In fact, AT&T and IBM, the two big companies in 1965, turned down the contract to build the packet switch network. They didn't want the job. They already had monopolies.

They didn't want the job to build a packet switch network. They didn't need competition. And so, it went to a small group of people at BB&N, Bolt Beranek and Newman, up on Memorial Drive in Boston, to build something called the ARPANET. All built by federal money.

Then in 1990, I was in Congress. We had to pass a bill to move it over, to call it the Internet, all built by, let's remember, by the federal government, not by the private sector.

Just so we get that straight.

Then this democratic vision of the Internet, articulated by thinkers like Sir Tim Berners-Lee, who created the World Wide Web in the late 1980s, gave way to a darker, centralized version. And, for over the last 15 years or so, we've lived under an Internet shaped by corporate consolidation, and a business model that prioritizes profit over public interest, reminding us of AT&T and IBM back in 1965.

Exact same corporate model. Monopoly. Oligopoly. We're just back to the origin story. Why did we build that packet switch network? The digital world we inhabit today, one where a handful of companies dictate access, where independent voices struggle to be heard, and where digital surveillance is the price of participation, has left us divided and polarized and powerless.

Today, we are at an inflection point for the Internet, a moment that will define whether the Internet can serve as a tool for empowerment and creativity and truth, whether it is co-opted by authoritarian forces, corporate monopolies, and artificial intelligence systems, that put profits and corporate power over people.

I want to take my time today to briefly highlight the greatest risks facing the free and open Internet today, and articulate a competing agenda to capitalize on Sir Tim Berners Lee's original vision of the Internet, when he created the World Wide Web. -- to break down the walled gardens, entrenched corporate monopolies, and to put the American people back in control of our online town square.

So let's start with three serious risks.

First, thanks to big moneyed opposition, the Federal Communications Commission has lost its power to oversee the country's most important communications tool, the Internet, and to impose common sense net neutrality rules on Internet service providers. Because, without net neutrality, consumers, small businesses, and innovators alike will face increased costs, reduced choice, and less competition.

It is lose, lose, lose.

The Sixth Circuit ruling against the FCC's net neutrality rules upended the fundamental principle that the Internet Service Providers should not act as gatekeepers favoring certain users, content, or services, over others. The decision reverses the simple principle undermining the open Internet, that users, not Internet providers, should determine what succeeds online.

Second, the Trump administration is waging a relentless war on online speech and independent journalism, using carrots and sticks to pressure big tech platforms to adopt content moderation policies that promote conservative viewpoints.

From the White House, to the FCC, to the Federal Trade Commission, Trump administration officials have made regulating the speech of online platforms one of their top priorities. They claim to be waging a campaign against censorship. Don't be fooled. It's really a campaign OF censorship.

And faced with threats to their favored liability shield, Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, and with promises of fewer regulations and tax cuts, the big tech platforms have been all too happy to capitulate to the Trump administration.

Just look at where big tech oligarchs sat at the inauguration. They sat in front of Trump's cabinet, James Madison spinning in his grave, thinking about this very thought that Article 1 is the Congress, Article 2 is the President, Article 3 and now we have Article 3.5, the Muskocracy, which then trumps all of the original Constitution. These are all three articles of the United States Constitution.

I don't know what those Minutemen and women in Lexington and Concord are thinking. I don't know what James Madison is thinking, but this is not what they were fighting for. They were fighting to make sure there was not a king, there was not authoritarianism.

That's where we are right now. And tech oligarchs cozying up to an authoritarian President is a dangerous combination.

And finally, after over a decade of the government failing to regulate the big tech platforms, the rise of artificial intelligence threatens to double down on our consolidated tech ecosystem.

Now, I've been on the Telecommunications Committee for 48 years, I've been in Congress. I was there before there were faxes, fax machines, and today, there are no fax machines.

That's how long I've been on the telecommunications bed. I'm either the author or the co-author of every law that's passed in the last 48 years. Okay? So, I know where it came from. I know what the goals were, okay? I was there, either authoring or co-authoring every single law.

So, the development of AI remains fluid. It is no surprise that the same platforms that have dominated the web 2.0 would have major competitive advantages in the race to develop ever more sophisticated AI models. The one exception to that rule, Open AI, only broke into Big Tech's walled garden thanks to the remarkable success of ChatGPT.

In this sense, Big Tech threatens to become Big AI, reconstituting the centralized and anti-democratic features of social media into new AI powered platforms. AI should stand for All Included. That's not going to be the goal of these big tech CEOs. If those three risks filled you with dread, you are not alone.

But, the good news is that the future of the Internet remains in our hands. With the right combination, we can reinvent the Internet as a place for democratic participation and economic dynamism. We can rebuild the Internet, not as a tool for billionaires and autocrats, but as a public good for all.

In fact, we are seeing new movements emerge, ones that put users back in control. We see it on the rise of Blue Sky and Fediverse, a decentralized Internet where no single company controls speech or access. We see it in the development of interoperability and data portability tools that allow users to move freely between platforms, breaking the stranglehold of monopolies. We see it in efforts to pass privacy laws, especially for children and teens who are facing a youth mental health crisis driven in part by big tech.

One in three teenage girls in America contemplated suicide two years ago. One in ten actually attempted suicide. One in five LGBTQ youth attempted suicide two years ago. The Surgeon General is implicating social media. Are we going to do something about it? Are we going to wait for voluntary standards to do it?

Are we going to move in and do something for our society, for kids? Because they're going to be writing books in 20 years saying, What were they thinking? Just making money? On us? On our mental health? On our well being?

They're going to be writing books that are just going to excoriate an entire generation of Americans, just driven by dollar signs, and not by the overall well being of people in our society, especially young people.

Ultimately, these issues are about freedom. The freedom to control your own data, the freedom to message friends and family, across any platform, the freedom to click, to swipe, and like, on open, dynamic, and free Internet.

For over two decades, I've been fighting for that type of dynamic communication system, whether it was launching the satellite TV industry to compete with the incumbent cable providers in 1992, that's the 18 inch satellite dish. That's my bill. 1992, moving over the 200 MHz for the 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, and 7th cell phone company. That's my bill. Break up the AT&T cell phone monopoly. Or the 1996 Telecom Act, breaking down all of the monopolies, cable and telephone. That's my bill.

1996, Darwinian paranoia inducing competition. That's what everyone says they believe in, until they get to the point where they can create the monopoly. They're innovators until they can become monopolists. So I've always worked to prevent incumbent

monopolists from squashing competition, squeezing consumers, squishing the little guy.

Today, we stand at another technological crossroads. For too long, we have accepted an Internet that extracts more than it gives, that concentrates power instead of distributing it, and that treats users as products rather than participants. With new decentralized platforms, and the rise of AI, we have a chance to put that era behind us, to capitalize on a new approach, one that prioritizes people over platforms, communities over corporations, innovation over entrenchment.

The Internet was meant to be free and fair and open. If we choose to fight for it, it can be that way again.

So, I thank the State of the Net for inviting me here today. This is a critical moment in not just U. S., but world history. What are we going to do in order to put the safeguards in place? Do we believe in consumer protections? Do we believe in Darwinian competition? Do we believe that everyone should be able to fully participate?

Or are we going to allow, as we had back in 1965, just a small number of companies that determined would we move to a different future? That's going to be the challenge, and that's what I'm going to continue to fight for what I have fought for from the very beginning of my career, and I will continue to fight for it every single day, because democracy requires us to have that fight and to win.

Thank you all so much for being here. What you gonna do?

[Applause]