

WRITTEN STATEMENT OF
MICHELE COMBS, VICE PRESIDENT OF COMMUNICATIONS
THE CHRISTIAN COALITION OF AMERICA

HEARING ON:
NET NEUTRALITY AND FREE SPEECH ON THE INTERNET

BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY, TASK FORCE ON
COMPETITION POLICY AND ANTITRUST LAWS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Chairman Conyers, Ranking Member Keller, and Distinguished Members of the Committee on the Judiciary Task Force on Competition Policy and Antitrust Laws, my name is Michele Combs, and I am the Vice President of Communications for the Christian Coalition of America. Thank you for inviting our organization to testify on this very important hearing on “Net Neutrality and Free Speech on the Internet.”

The Christian Coalition of America (“CCA” or “Christian Coalition”) is the largest and most active conservative grassroots political organization in the United States. We offer people of faith a vehicle to be actively involved in shaping their government. Christian Coalition of America is a political organization, which is made up of pro-family Americans who care deeply about becoming active citizens for the purpose of guaranteeing that government acts in ways that strengthen, rather than threaten, families. As such, we work together with Christians of all denominations, as well as with other Americans who agree with our mission and with our ideals.

Our hallmark work lies in voter education. Prior to the last election, the Christian Coalition of America distributed a record 70 million voter guides throughout all 50 states. These non-partisan guides gave voters a clear understanding of where various candidates stood on the issues important to them. With this knowledge, millions of voters went to polls to make their voices heard.

Use of the Internet has allowed the Christian Coalition to amplify the voices of millions of hard-working, pro-family Americans in a way that has revolutionized their ability to be heard and to engage in the political process.

The Internet connects people all over the world in a manner, scope, and ease that would be impossible anywhere but online. It provides a voice for even the most modest members of society to disseminate ideas on a scale traditionally reserved only for the most powerful.

Consequently, the reason the Christian Coalition supports Net Neutrality is simple. We believe that organizations such as the Christian Coalition should be able to continue to use the Internet to communicate with our members and with a worldwide audience without a phone or cable company snooping in on our communications and deciding whether to allow a particular communication to proceed, slow it down, or offer to speed it up if the author pays extra to be on the “fast lane.”

Simply put, free speech should not stop when you turn on your computer or pick up your cell phone. The Christian Coalition testified some time ago on this issue and many members of Congress promised to act if network operators blocked political speech. We are here today to say, ‘network operators are blocking political speech.’

Recent actions by the nation's biggest phone and cable companies should be of grave concern to all those who care about public participation in our democracy. Consider these recent examples:

1. Verizon Wireless Blocking Political Speech. Last fall, Verizon Wireless censored text messages sent by the pro-choice advocacy group, NARAL, to its own members who had voluntarily signed up to receive them. When NARAL protested, the phone company claimed the right to block any content "that, in its discretion, may be seen as controversial or unsavory." When this did not satisfy the concerned, Verizon Wireless said not to worry, because the company would also block the speech of pro-life advocates such as the Christian Coalition.

After news of Verizon's censorship hit the front-page of the *New York Times* - - sparking a loud public outcry -- the company quickly backpedaled, issuing an apology and blaming the blocking on a "dusty internal policy," -- while still reserving the right to block text messages in the future in its own discretion.

2. AT&T Blocking Political Speech. In August 2007, AT&T censored a webcast of a concert by the rock band Pearl Jam just as lead singer Eddie Vedder started talking about politics. The company claimed it was a glitch -- as were at least three other instances when AT&T cut off political speech during live concerts.
3. Comcast Blocking Access to Users Ability to Access the Bible. In October 2007, the news organization Associated Press reported that Comcast was blocking consumers' ability to download the King James Bible using a popular file-sharing technology. Comcast at first denied that it was engaging in such discrimination. After independent tests confirmed that Comcast was indeed engaging in this behavior, Comcast claimed that it was simply conducting routine network management. This “routine network management” has launched two petitions at the Federal Communications Commission, a consumer complaint at the FCC, at least two class action

lawsuits, an investigation by a state attorney general, and countless complaints in the blogosphere. Yet Comcast continues to argue it has the right to discriminate against such applications. And it is my understanding that it argues that the FCC has no legal authority to do anything about it.

It has also been pointed out that Comcast's discriminatory conduct just so happens to block access to video distribution applications that compete with Comcast's own programming. If Comcast were to create a Christian family channel, would Washington allow it to block access to a competing product from the Christian Coalition?

It is our understanding that AT&T, Verizon, Comcast and other Internet access providers in the fine print of their "terms of service" agreements, reserve the right to engage in just this kind of discriminatory behavior.

If phone companies cannot tell Americans what to say on a phone call, why should they be able to control content or tell us what to say or send in a text message, an email, or anywhere else?

Consider what is at stake for an organization like the Christian Coalition. The Internet is a powerful tool for religious speech, and a tool that is increasingly utilized by many Americans for just this purpose. The Pew Internet & American Life project's most recent study showed that nearly two thirds of American Internet users were online for faith-related reasons. Thirty-eight percent of the nation's Internet users sent and received emails with faith based content. Thirty-five percent have sent religious holiday e-cards. Thirty-two percent have sought out faith related news. Seventeen percent have looked for information on attending religious services. Seven percent have made or answered online prayer requests. And 7% have made donations to religious organizations or charities through the Internet.¹

The Christian Coalition's Web site is visited by millions of Americans every year. In addition, we send out thousands of email alerts on a weekly basis and have available our voter guides to thousands of churches and voters every election. Many Americans use our Web site as a educational tool on a daily basis. Our State Chapters have their own Web sites and use their Web sites to organize and educate voters on a daily basis. Without fast access, many of our supporters would not be able to keep up with legislation and the election process.

Consider some other examples of Web sites and technologies that promote religious discourse on the Internet:

- GodTube (www.GodTube.com) is a video sharing and social networking website based in Dallas, Texas. In August 2007, GodTube was the fastest growing

¹ www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/126/report_display.asp

website in the country, at a rate of 1.7 million new users. Believers of all faiths can view over 40,000 videos with religious content.²

- MyChurch (www.mychurch.org) is a Christian social network that has combined many user friendly aspects of popular social networking sites. Its site claims to offer the members of over 6900 churches the chance to stay connected to their church, be apprised of community events, listen to sermon podcasts, and contribute to their parish or other religious causes.
- Miro (www.getmiro.com) is a growing, peer-to-peer Internet tv platform that uses BitTorrent and other technologies to provide video content. Over one hundred of its channels are devoted exclusively to topics covering religion and spirituality.

Net Neutrality is more important than ever because technology is converging. The Internet is not just for your computer anymore – it is also on your cell phone, your Blackberry, and even in your car. That is why it makes no sense that the laws that protect your right to engage in lawful speech over the phone do not extend to text messaging, e-mail, or access to web sites.

The Christian Coalition of America does not seek burdensome regulations. We generally believe in the proposition that less government is better than more government. And, we do not believe that governments should censor speech. But let's be clear. Right now, the telephone and cable companies are investing in and using the exact same censorship and content discrimination technologies that are being used by the Chinese government to censor speech.

In fact, the Chinese government is currently using these same technologies to block the Christian Coalition's speech from being received by its citizens. Washington should make it clear that it will not allow cable and phone companies to use these technologies to block the lawful speech rights of the Christian Coalition and others.

Increasingly, faith-based groups are turning to the Internet to promote their political rights, to engage in what Ronald Reagan called "the hard work of freedom." We should not let the phone and cable companies interfere with that work.

² *Christian Science Monitor*, February 6th, 2008