

**REMARKS OF FCC CHAIRMAN AJIT PAI  
AT THE SYMPOSIUM ON “THE FUTURE OF SPEECH ONLINE”**

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I'd like to thank our hosts for inviting me to participate in this event. I'm sure that those who work at the Newseum Institute, the Charles Koch Institute, and the Center for Democracy and Technology don't agree on everything. But these organizations have united to defend and promote a core freedom that should unite Americans across the ideological spectrum: the freedom of speech.

We fight for principles like freedom of speech because they serve as the foundation of our great nation. Americans don't share a single cultural heritage. What binds us is a set of shared principles that has made us a beacon for the world: the principle that all men are created equal, the principle of liberty and justice for all, and, yes, the principle of free expression.

Over 200 years ago, America ratified the First Amendment to the Constitution, which states “Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech.” But provisos on parchment alone aren't enough of a safeguard. We also must have a shared cultural commitment to the importance of free speech.

These days, I have to confess that I worry about whether that commitment is beginning to unravel.

For one thing, many seem not to know that there is such a thing as freedom of speech. A survey released earlier this week by the University of Pennsylvania showed that only 48% of Americans knew that freedom of speech was a right guaranteed by the First Amendment. And 37% couldn't name any First Amendment rights at all. Similarly, a Pew study last year revealed that 40% of millennials believed that the government should be able to bar individuals from making certain offensive statements.

Small wonder, then, that free speech in practice seems to be under siege in this country. Fewer today seem to be willing to defend to the death others' right to say things with which they might disagree. The situation on many college campuses is especially distressing. The cases are legion, so much so that simply reciting a college's name evokes the issue: Evergreen State, Yale, and just yesterday, Berkeley. The common thread is the belief, shared by too many, that those with views perceived as unpopular or offensive should be silenced. One has to wonder whether those who will one day carry the torch will be dedicated to open debate or will instead seek to marginalize viewpoints they don't like.

I also see worrying signs from my vantage point at the Federal Communications Commission. On Twitter, for example, people regularly demand that the FCC yank licenses from cable news channels like Fox News, MSNBC, or CNN because they disagree with the opinions expressed on those networks. Setting aside the fact that the FCC doesn't license cable channels, these demands are fundamentally at odds with our legal and cultural traditions.

On the other hand, when it comes to the future of free expression, I see positive signs as well. And the most hopeful one, in my view, is the expansion of Internet access.

Obviously, the Internet wasn't around when America was young. Back then, the most important information network was the postal system. In 1796, newspapers accounted for 70% of the weight carried by the Postal Service. Forty years later, that figure was up to 95%. Princeton sociologist Paul Starr has explained that “[a]t the nation’s founding, Americans were concerned with building not just a continental nation, but a republican one.” Our Founding Fathers made that clear in their treatment of the postal system. European countries taxed publications, but the United States promoted them by offering cheap postal rates. We also built a far more extensive postal network than any other nation, extending the system into rural areas. And so it was that this new nation, conceived in liberty, had the world’s first true mass circulation press.

The idea of universal access to information networks starts with the earliest days of our nation, but hardly ends there. Just look at the FCC. It was established in 1934, and charged with making wire and radio communication service “available, so far as possible, to all the people of the United States.”

Today, when we talk about universal service, we have in mind bringing high-speed Internet access, or “broadband,” to any American who wants it. Broadband is important for many reasons: it can help you get a job, start a company, get health care, educate your kids, and the like. But it’s also vital for free speech and political engagement.

Speaking publicly and getting engaged politically start with being informed, and it’s hard to imagine doing that these days without the Internet. Indeed, since I started this speech, I’ve thought of checking and posting on Twitter at least four times. (Some of you in the audience actually have done so, I’ll bet.)

The Internet has made it much easier for the American people to learn about what its government is doing. Right now, for example, anyone can go to the FCC’s website and read the proposals that Commissioners will vote on at our monthly meetings three weeks in advance. It wasn’t always so easy; not long ago, you’d have to hire a lawyer or lobbyist, or physically visit the FCC’s headquarters, to get this information—and even then, you could only get it *after* the FCC had voted! And instead of having to mail a letter complete with a stamp to make your voice heard in an FCC proceeding, anyone can easily submit a comment to the Commission online.

This level of transparency is reflected in Congress, where elected officials connect with their constituents in ways unimaginable a generation ago. Consider the bipartisan congressional duo of Will Hurd and Beto O’Rourke. Earlier this year, these two Texas Congressmen used Facebook Live to document their entire road trip from the Lone Star State back to Washington. They answered questions from constituents and discussed political topics—all while driving safely. Just being seen on the trip together showed America some cross-party camaraderie—a nice touch that’s not seen enough these days.

The Internet has also given people a platform to make their voices heard like never before. The old saying used to be, “Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one.” With the Internet, any American can be both speaker and publisher. Any American can build an audience well beyond one’s physical proximity. And any American can even make news—from Periscope coverage of a terrorist attack to viral sensations like Chris Crocker, who a decade ago this week made national headlines with his passionate defense of Britney Spears.

Obviously, the Internet has also transformed elections. The President's primary platform for getting his message out directly to the people was—and still is—Twitter. And the Internet has also democratized political fundraising. Just ask Bernie Sanders, who raised \$218 million online, \$27 on average at a time.

The evolution of smartphones with cameras has given rise to citizen journalists. Just look at the recent hurricanes in Texas and Florida. People used social media to provide first-hand, on-the-ground reports that enhanced situational awareness not only for people trying to find help, but for emergency responders identifying those in need of rescue.

Obviously, digital media and the explosion of online expression has created new challenges, many of which you've discussed today. But in my view, the positives outweigh the negatives. The Internet has democratized our political discourse. It has invigorated political debate. And in my view, it can help sustain our shared cultural commitment to free expression.

But for too many, this discussion is academic. That's because they are on the wrong side what I call the digital divide—the gap between those who have Internet access and those who don't. The Internet can be a great equalizer. It can bestow the opportunity to speak and learn and thrive, regardless of who you are or where you live. But if you find yourself on the wrong side of that divide, you're likely becoming less audible in the national discourse and more disconnected from civic life.

The most significant digital divides are along economic and geographic lines. Basically, if you're wealthy and live in a city, you should be in good shape. If you're low-income and/or live in a rural area, you're much more likely to have a problem. 93% of Americans earning more than \$75,000 have home broadband service, compared to only 53% of those making less than \$30,000. In urban areas, only 2% of Americans lack access to high-speed fixed service. In rural areas, 28% go without.

Each percentage point on the wrong side of this divide represents hundreds of thousands of Americans who cannot fully participate in the digital democracy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

I've met many of these folks. You've talked today about breaking out of the bubbles we inevitably tend to inhabit. I've done my best to do that in my current role. There are few things I enjoy more than traveling across the country and learning first-hand about the challenges facing people in areas with poor or no high-speed connectivity. This year alone, I've logged more than 3,000 miles on road trips—places like Madelia, Minnesota and Zelienople, Pennsylvania, Wardensville, West Virginia and Casper, Wyoming. I'll be hitting the road again next week, visiting parts of South Florida that are suddenly disconnected in the wake of Hurricane Irma and then heading to the rural Midwest—including my hometown of Parsons, Kansas. At every stop, what will be front and center of my mind is the FCC's central mission under my chairmanship—closing the divide, and extending digital opportunity to every American.

The FCC has tools to accomplish that mission, and we're putting those tools to work.

The details are admittedly weedy, but they're important. With your indulgence, I'll spend a few minutes describing them.

The first of these tools involves federal subsidies. At the initial FCC meeting for which I could set the agenda, we adopted two significant measures—each on a bipartisan basis, I might add—to expand broadband access in unserved areas. One was an order to bring mobile broadband to millions of Americans who don't have it today. Previously, the FCC was spending

about \$25 million a month of taxpayer money to subsidize wireless carriers in areas where private capital had already been spent to build out networks. This Commission is redirecting that spending and more—\$4.53 billion over the next decade—in order to bring 4G LTE service to unserved rural Americans. And we’re doing it in an efficient, fiscally responsible way by using a competitive reverse auction to allocate these funds.

At the same meeting, we also voted to move forward with \$2 billion in fixed broadband investment. Here too, we set up a competitive bidding process to make the most productive use of that money when it comes to bringing high-speed Internet access to currently unserved rural Americans. Our rules for this auction will also encourage a wide range of entities to participate, from wireless Internet service providers to electric utilities.

To the extent that we offer companies federal subsidies for building out in unserved areas, we also want to make sure that there is accountability. We have put in place buildout and reporting requirements along the way. If we give a company taxpayer dollars, they have to tell us that they are meeting deployment benchmarks within a certain period of time.

Federal subsidies are one thing. But we also need to update our rules. Public-private partnerships are useful to spur infrastructure investment in areas where the economic incentives for private investment don’t exist. But we also want to modernize our regulations to give companies a stronger business case to build and expand high-speed networks.

That’s why we’re aiming to reduce regulatory barriers to the installation of wireline infrastructure. Our goal is to lower the cost and speed the deployment of this infrastructure on things like utility poles and to accelerate the transition from copper networks to modern fiber networks. This means more money will be spent building the resilient networks of tomorrow, not maintaining the fading networks of yesterday.

As the world goes mobile, we’re also aiming to promote more wireless infrastructure. The networks of the future will require not so much massive cell towers as hundreds of thousands of small cells. These will be the tiny building blocks for the 5G wireless networks of the future. 5G has delivered fiber-like speeds in testing, and it could ultimately mean better access and more competitive choice for consumers, and hence lower prices and better service quality.

But our efforts aren’t just limited to what’s on land. For instance, we recently approved—again, unanimously—an order paving the way for a satellite company to use its planned constellation of 720 satellites to provide high-speed access to hard-to-serve areas, like rural and Tribal areas. Other satellite companies have also asked the FCC for permission to do the same.

Even with all of this—smarter subsidies, reformed regulations—some Americans could be left behind. That’s why, last September, I proposed that Congress create what I called Gigabit Opportunity Zones. The idea was simple: provide tax incentives to encourage companies to build Internet infrastructure in low-income urban and rural areas that are otherwise too easy to write off. My proposal was inspired by former Secretary Jack Kemp, who lamented decades ago how many cynics “miss how rapidly, in an entrepreneurial economy, the poor can move up the ladder of success.” I’m thrilled that Senators Shelley Moore Capito and Chris Coons and Congressman Doug Collins have introduced the Gigabit Opportunity Act, which advances my

proposal. This would be a powerful way of delivering to low-income Americans the online freedom of speech—a freedom which too many today enjoy only in theory.

The bottom line? Bridging the digital divide is my highest priority as FCC Chairman. To work, to learn, to educate, to heal, but most relevant here, to *speak*, we cannot fail or falter. It won't be easy, but we'll keep going. America's civic future, including the tradition of free expression, depend on it.

I'll close where I began—in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Our first President was quoteworthy in many respects, but one quote in particular has always caught my fancy. George Washington remarked that “[i]f the freedom of speech is taken away then dumb and silent we may be led, like sheep to the slaughter.” A strong platform that allows the people to share their ideas and inform themselves about current affairs forestalls that fate. And in a remarkably short time, the Internet has become one such platform. The FCC's charge and our cultural traditions remind us that we need to extend that online megaphone to all Americans. I look forward to working with you to do that—and to fulfilling this timeless vision for the digital age.