

TO: Federal Communications Commission
FR: Alex Shapiro
RE: Comment on Net Neutrality/Preserving the Open Internet NPRM (09-191)
DT: January 8, 2010

My name is Alex Shapiro, and I'm a composer. I'm pleased to offer these comments in as the FCC's Notice of Proposed Rulemaking on preserving an open internet. I am also honored to have participated in the Commission's National Broadband Plan workshops, which I found highly illuminating. I applaud your efforts to both expand high-speed internet service and ensure that the web remains accessible to all users.

As I mentioned in my previous statement on broadband, my own use of the internet has had a remarkable impact on career. This technology has allowed me to reach audiences around the world, obtain commissions and sell recordings and scores — all from my home on a bridge-less island in rural Washington State.

I do business every week in several continents at once. From India, Australia, Germany and Bulgaria and our own country, clients hear excerpts of my music on the internet and contact me directly. I even received a commission from a U.S. Army concert wind band via MySpace. This certainly couldn't have happened in any other era.

The internet is increasingly vital for those of us working in genres like contemporary concert music, classical music, jazz, bluegrass or other cultural forms that are considered outside of the popular mainstream. Whereas traditional broadcast media like terrestrial radio rarely provides a platform for niche music, the internet allows artists like myself to reach audiences and connect with others who help to promote American art and culture.

The power of ideas resides in the act of their dissemination. A creative work may be thought provoking or life changing, but without the ability to distribute it to others, its content is of limited use.

For nearly all of human history, music was something only experienced live, locally. Only for a little more than a century have we been able to record our legacy and share it with people around the world — one retailer and one LP, cassette, or CD at a time. And only in the past fifteen years or so have those numbers shifted from one at a time in an analog format, to millions at a time, digitally.

The internet is the most significant contribution to human communication since the printing press. And in the nearly six hundred years that have passed since the Gutenberg Bible made its first run at being Number One on the Medieval Times Best Seller List, technology has progressed to the point where anyone on the globe with a computer and a web connection can publish their own work. This puts independent creators like myself on an equal footing with longstanding publishers in traditional print media. Thanks to the web, we are all publishers, and we are all editors.

For this and other reasons, such as our right to free expression, the open platform of the internet must be preserved. And, like many freedoms in our lives, it's important that we remain vigilant and protect our access to the web. Should the open internet disappear, it's likely that the free-flowing manner in which creators, innovators and entrepreneurs currently conduct our business would, as well.

If an ISP is allowed to give preference to only the best-funded players, small businesses will not be able to compete. Why would a customer wait impatiently for a slow connection to load from an independent supplier, when in a flash they can get onto the page of a mass producer? Net neutrality regulations would prevent ISPs from banishing smaller entrepreneurs — including musical artists — to the swampy edges of the economic river of commerce.

It would be a sobering moment if the very tool that permits our newfound publishing freedom—the internet—was allowed to favor only those who could afford it. This speaks loudly to First Amendment issues, as the decentralization of control is essential for a vital economy encouraging all voices from all participants.

By the same token, there is a distinction between the use of the technology, and the misuse of it. Free speech and free access does not mean free music. All creators of content, whether they are large companies or sole artists who upload their own works, should be protected from piracy, and nothing about net neutrality claims otherwise. There is an important difference between the platform and the content.

Artists can now be the operators of a global, virtual printing press that will forever alter the world's experience of the arts. Free and thriving cultures are those in which ideas and information are widely exchanged. Information is power, and an informed and educated society is a powerful one. We should be wary of any entity, corporate or governmental, that seeks to limit the distribution of our knowledge, experience and wisdom. In our lives as creative artists, we exercise our greatest power — our communication — all the time. And the world is the better for it.

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to offer my perspectives as you undertake this important proceeding.