NEWMUSICBOX

WRITTEN BY
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ARTICLES

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As Important as the Printing Press: Net Neutrality and Artists' Freedom

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.

Ages before the Gutenberg Bible's mid-15th century arrival, Eastern cultures printed their ideas using fixed media like woodblock, clay, and rock. Until the ideas that were—sometimes literally—set in stone could be readily duplicated, the scope of their power was limited to local geography. But once the printing press was invented, the world was changed as a far wider distribution of ideas became possible.

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. Our species is experiencing yet another sea change: one on a par with what occurred at the cusp of the Renaissance, as well as with what transpired due to the Industrial Revolution at the cusp of a century four hundred years later. Now we've progressed almost another two hundred years, and as 21st-century artists with much to communicate, we are on the front lines to benefit from advances our ancestors could not have imagined.

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. Suddenly, those who can find a "send" button to click are on seemingly equal footing with longstanding publishers in traditional print media. We leave it to the consumers of pixels to decide which postings are worthy and which are not; each of us has now become the filterer of information. Thanks to the web, we are all publishers, and we are all editors.

But our ability to share our creations around the world lies in our access to the necessary portal. This is why **net neutrality**—the term for an open internet that is not owned, controlled, or censored by any corporation—is crucial to artists.

With access to affordable, high-speed web service, music artists are able to compete on a more or less equal technological playing field with the biggest content providers on the planet. This is especially important for those of us working in genres like contemporary concert music, classical music, jazz, bluegrass, or other cultural forms considered outside the popular mainstream, both in style, and, too often, in income generation. The more pervasive a web presence we create to display our talent, and the more broadly linked that presence becomes due to the power of viral networking, the greater the chance for our success. It is stunning to remember that less than twenty years ago, none of us could have created a career from whole cloth in this manner. Now each of us is able to be an entrepreneur, reaching potential fans and clients in every corner of the map, and reaping financial rewards from the world's enjoyment of our work.

> **Plug In on Net Neutrality at the FCC!**
>
> As you may have heard, the debate around net neutrality is heating up, and it's more important than ever to make your voice heard on this crucial issue. Musician education and advocacy nonprofit Future of Music Coalition (FMC) has created an easy and painless way for you to do just that.
>
> With a new FCC in place—and a majority of commissioners in favor of codifying the net neutrality principles—artists and the public have a remarkable opportunity to play a part in achieving public policy that serves YOUR interests.
>
> **How you can participate:**
>
> FMC has built **an online form** to help musicians, composers, songwriters and labels file a public comment in the FCC's Net Neutrality/Preserving an Open Internet proceeding.
>
> The form has nine text boxes, each with explanatory text that matches some of the many questions that the FCC is asking of the public in this NPRM. All you have to do is type your own thoughts into each box, and hit "submit." They'll make sure that it's filed at the FCC in the proper proceeding.
>
> Spread the word among your peers and across your social networks. It's incredibly important that the FCC knows that preserving an open internet is vital to the lives of creators, labels, and fans. Now is the time!

It's easy to take the internet for granted. You wake up in the morning, and it's just there. You go to sleep at night, and it's still there. It's always there, and if your music is on it, then you are always everywhere, all the time, even as you slumber. No greater magic act could be devised. But like many freedoms in our lives, it's important that we remain vigilant and protect our access to the web. The reason artists need to care about net neutrality is that, should an open internet disappear, it's likely that the free-flowing manner in which we now conduct our business would as well.

The Mississippi River has been a free conduit for commerce since the beginning of U.S. history. One could say that it was the internet of its time. Its many locks are maintained by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and whether you are the captain of a 200-foot long barge or the paddler of a 13-foot long kayak, the river is yours to navigate. The internet is similar, with service providers in the role of the lock-maintainers. Net neutrality is vital because it protects the information pipeline and ensures that this river for data can be used by all.

If a provider wants to use its power to make more money by giving preference to only certain players, e.g. allowing major conglomerates to operate at far faster speeds for far bigger charges, 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 deep pocket mass producer? Net neutrality regulations would prevent ISPs from banishing those of us with more shallow pockets 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.

The internet is a communication tool, just like the telephone. One should not confuse the tool with that which is communicated through it. Imagine your horror if the phone company cut off your service after listening in on a call you made that it found objectionable. Two well known cases of this very kind of abuse made big news over the past couple of years, and reminded many of us just how vigilant we need to be. Verizon Wireless **refused to allow** the non-profit women's rights organization NARAL to use its subscription text messaging service. And AT&T **censored part of a webcast** Pearl Jam concert when band members sang disparaging remarks about then-President George W. Bush. Net neutrality means that internet service providers must not discriminate as to how their data pipeline is being used, and must never control 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 shared. Information is power, and an informed and educated society is a powerful one. Beware of those who wish to limit the distribution of our wisdom, because surely, they must be afraid that we might use it. In our lives as creative artists, we exercise our greatest power—our communication—all the time. And the world is the better for it.

Composer Alex Shapiro has balanced her life in music with her involvement in civic issues for many years. In the 1990s she chaired the State and National Legislative Action Committee for the ACLU of Southern California, for which she also served as vice president of the board of directors, and was a public speaker for the ACLU on privacy and First Amendment issues. More recently she has lobbied senators and congresspeople on Capitol Hill with ASCAP members on behalf of ensuring audiovisual performance download rights, and testified in September 2009 at a public hearing of the FCC in Washington, D.C., on digital piracy and net neutrality. Shapiro currently serves on the board of directors of the American Music Center.

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