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OPINION

Corporate Interests Are Warping the Internet

Why should they hold even more power?

BY MARK LUSKUS

My identity was stolen this year. The perpetrator didn't open credit cards in my name or gain access to my finances. Instead, they used my name to submit a comment to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in support of repealing net neutrality rules.

Those rules, enacted in 2015, declared the internet to be a free and open place. They prevent internet service providers, or ISPs, like Comcast and AT&T from restricting access to any websites — either permanently or to charge



you more money to access them. Imagine your water company charging you more for the water that comes out of your shower than the water that comes out of your sink. Or imagine not being allowed to use your shower at all, even though you pay a water bill.

That's what net neutrality rules protect consumers from when it comes to the internet. But Ajit Pai, the current FCC chairman and a former lawyer for Verizon, scheduled a vote to repeal net neutrality. To do this, he had to solicit public comment on the matter.

In the past, this has resulted in millions of pro-net neutrality comments — which makes sense, because most Americans support it. But this time, an unusual number of anti-net neutrality comments showed up.

Why? Because of the 22 mil-

lion comments received, half or more of them appear to be fake, likely posted by bots or special interest organizations attempting to sway the FCC's opinion. When I checked the FCC's website, I learned that one of those fake comments used my own name and address.

Someone had stolen my identity to advocate for a position that I didn't agree with.

Several people and organizations, including the New York attorney general, have petitioned the FCC for information on the scale and origin of fake comments. However, the FCC has rejected these petitions.

As a federal agency, the FCC should be far more concerned about the identity theft of the citizens they're tasked to represent.

Internet providers like Verizon, the former employer of the FCC chairman, complain that net neu-

trality rules slow their investments in internet technology. However, ISPs exist in a shockingly non-competitive market.

More than 50 million households in the United States have only one choice of provider, and those providers score the lowest customer satisfaction rates of all 43 industries tracked by the American Consumer Satisfaction Index. Personally, I've never had an ISP that offers reasonable customer service or internet speeds and reliability at the levels I pay for.

This isn't an industry that consumers are satisfied with, so why should they hold even more power than they already do? No wonder they have to rely on sleazy tactics like stealing identities and posting fake comments.

The internet has become an essential tool in the 21st century. A small handful of companies

shouldn't have the power to decide which parts of it people can access.

Corporate-funded lies and identity theft highlight a major threat to the benefits of increased communication. How can we prevent special interest groups from warping the internet to spread misinformation and further their political goals?

That's a question we must answer, because misinformation campaigns are rampant, and they're being used to restrict your rights and freedoms. But at the very least, a former Verizon employee shouldn't hold the power to give ISPs a major win at the expense of consumers — and a free and open internet.

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Journalist was a Fearless Civil Rights Legend

Honoring a legacy and press freedom

BY MARC H. MORIAL

"Glaring down at us from the truck were five white men, armed to the teeth with shotguns. All five sprang from the truck and surrounded the car. 'Get out,' the huskiest one snapped. 'Who are you n****s and where are you going?' I couldn't think of anything but the truth so I told them, 'We're reporters down here to cover the [Emmett Till] murder trial. We took the wrong road and got lost.' 'You n****s have no business around here,' he sneered. 'You're just stirring up trouble.' Directing us to keep our hands above our heads, they frisked both of us then searched the car. After what seemed like a lifetime, the 'hunters' were satisfied with having scared the hell out of us and having ended their search ordered us to 'get the hell out' of there." — **Simeon Booker, Shocking the Conscience, A Reporter's Account of the Civil Rights Movement.**

For many decades, including during my years as mayor of New Orleans, Jet magazine ran a column of happenings from around



the country, called Ticker Tape. I was honored that my work often attracted the notice of the columnist, Washington Bureau Chief Simeon Booker. Memorably, it was through Booker's column that my engagement to my wife, Michelle Miller, was announced to the nation. By then, he was a civil rights legend, having chronicled far more momentous events.

We join the nation in mourning his passing last

wet with tears, she leaned over the body, just removed from a rubber bag in a Chicago funeral home, and cried out, 'Darling, you have not died in vain. Your life has been sacrificed for something.'"

Perhaps more than any other journalist of his time, Booker most comprehensively chronicled the impact of the Urban League Movement on civil rights and racial equality in the nation. He covered President Dwight D. Eisenhower's historic 1958 meeting

and the National Council of Negro Women — but also the frustration that followed and led to the 1963 March on Washington.

To create a realistic picture of the economic status of blacks in 1960 for the 5th anniversary edition of Jet's sister publication, Ebony, Booker relied on the National Urban League's research "to tell black audiences what they already suspected: that the masses of Negro citizens were actually farther removed, relatively speaking,

the tragic death of National Urban League Executive Director Whitney M. Young, who drowned in Nigeria in 1971. A friend, Brigadier General Daniel "Chappie" James, then the highest ranking black officer in the Air Force, tearfully confirmed the news.

"He's my hero," he choked. "He's my kind of guy because he gets in there and proves what a black cat can do — with his head instead of a brick." Chappie could probably write a list as long as both of his massive arms of the people who might not be where they were in their careers if it weren't for the work of the Urban League, whose focus was jobs, jobs, jobs. While other civil rights organizations hammered away at school desegregation, voting rights and public accommodations — all of which were important — the Urban League had its own niche — and it was economics — the economics of having a job, and after that a better job, until a black man or woman reached his or her fullest potential.

We are grateful now, as then, for Booker's clear-eyed and fearless reporting. At a time when reckless accusations of "fake news" threaten to undermine the vital role of the Fourth Estate, we should honor his legacy by defending freedom of the press.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.

He rode a bus with the Freedom Riders in 1961. He covered not only President John F. Kennedy's 1962 summit with the "Big Six" — having expanded to include the leaders of the Congress of Racial Equality and the National Council of Negro Women — but also the frustration that followed and led to the 1963 March on Washington.

week at the age of 99. In person, Simeon Booker appeared the epitome of a bookish wordsmith, with his heavy eyeglass frames and natty bowtie. But his mild-mannered looks belied his ferocity as a journalist and a civil rights warrior.

He gained fame as "the man from Jet" during his coverage of Emmett Till's murder, funeral and his murderers' trial. His description of Emmett's mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, at the funeral became instantly iconic: "Her face

with the "Big Four" civil rights leaders, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, A. Phillip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, and my predecessor as head of the National Urban League, Lester Granger. He rode a bus with the Freedom Riders in 1961. He covered not only President John F. Kennedy's 1962 summit with the "Big Six" — having expanded to include the leaders of the Congress of Racial Equality

from the mainstream of American life than they were 20 years earlier."

Before he found his own office space in Washington, Booker often worked out of the Greater Washington Urban League — and even hired away a staffer, E. Fannie Granton, as his first employee when he opened Jet's Washington Bureau.

In his autobiography, Shocking the Conscience, A Reporter's Account of the Civil Rights Movement, Booker wrote about