

# THE HILL

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## BUSINESS & LOBBYING

### **Net neutrality lobbyists stick with a grassroots approach**

*By [Elana Schor](#)*

Though the Internet firms, public advocacy groups and bloggers fighting for the regulatory principle known as “net neutrality” decisively lost their House battle last week, they do not plan to regroup and change their grassroots focus as the lobbying war reignites in the Senate.

The still-escalating fight over network neutrality pits large phone and cable companies, which want the right to charge extra fees for priority Internet access, against content providers that are wary of a pay-for-play system and would like a so-called “neutral” web. Both sides launched large ad buys and coalitions to maximize their influence on lawmakers, but pro-neutrality lobbyists admit that the Bells’ and cable sector’s skill at blanketing the Hill was difficult to match.

“We were completely outmanned and outgunned on the lobbying front,” said Paul Misener, vice president of public policy at Amazon.com. “It will be unfortunate if that’s the way things are decided. Perhaps that’s naive on my part, to think we might have a chance.”

The pro-neutrality alliance, led by Amazon, Google, auction site eBay and Microsoft, took advantage of the Web’s potential as a grassroots lobbying tool as the House Energy and Commerce Committee took up a broad telecom bill that would create national video franchising. The net-neutrality provisions went from a minor element of the overall House bill, which gives the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) authority to enforce four neutrality guidelines released last year, to its most contentious provision.

Phone and cable corporations complemented their in-house lobbying efforts with the Hands Off the Internet Coalition and signed Mike McCurry, the Clinton-era White House spokesman now with Public Strategies, as a co-chairman. The pro-neutrality Internet firms, dealing with less entrenched in-house operations, opened two coalitions of their own: It’s Our Net and Save the Internet.

“As the grassroots effort becomes stronger, more members pay attention to it,” said Earl Comstock, president of Comptel, the trade group of upstart telecom-service providers that belongs to It’s Our Net. “Part of the problem is, there’s a perception that this is just a fight between the AT&Ts and the Amazons of the world. ... This really isn’t a fight between big companies; it’s about the future of America’s innovation and competitiveness.”

Comstock is a former senior aide to Senate Commerce Committee Chairman Ted Stevens (R-Alaska), whose initial take on telecom overhaul pleased pro-neutrality lobbyists even less than the House version. Stevens pledged to work with his panel’s ranking Democrat, Sen. Daniel Inouye (Hawaii), and other neutrality-minded members to reach a compromise, but an advance look at his new draft, which will get a hearing today, showed no change in the net-neutrality provision.

The situation could change later this week, when Stevens hopes to release a second draft after formally meeting with Inouye on the matter, according to a Senate Republican aide.

Ali Amirhooshmand, a vice-president at Cassidy & Associates who lobbied for Bell companies on the House bill, predicted that pro-neutrality lobbyists are in for disheartening déjà vu in the Senate if they persist in relying on grassroots.

“At most town meetings, constituents don’t raise their hands and talk about net neutrality,” Amirhooshmand said. “They talk about Iraq, taxes, the economy. As an issue inside the Beltway, the strength lies with companies that have representatives that can cover inside the Beltway. The Bell and cables together, when they are united, have a hand in every district.”

Pro-neutrality companies did enlist outside help to navigate Washington, with Google signing PodestaMattoon and Public Policy Partners and eBay inking Mehlman Vogel Castagnetti in December. Still, they emphasize the value of more populist partners such as the Consumers Union and Public Knowledge.

“We want to do more of both” traditional, member-targeted lobbying and grassroots outreach, Google lobbyist Alan Davidson said late last week. “We are working with specific members who have been conflicted but understand the core issue.”

The unlikely pro-neutrality alliance, which includes MoveOn.org and the Christian Coalition, faces two initial challenges in the Senate: securing more Republican supporters for Sen. Olympia Snowe’s (R-Maine) net-neutrality bill, which so far has only Democratic co-sponsors, and keeping Democrats more unified on the issue than they were in last week’s House vote.

While 11 GOP members joined more than two-thirds of the Democratic caucus to support a strong net-neutrality amendment from Rep. Ed Markey (D-Mass.), only two of those Republicans — House Judiciary Committee Chairman James Sensenbrenner (Wis.) and Rep. Heather Wilson (N.M.) — remained opposed to the bill as a whole. More than 90 Democrats ultimately voted with the GOP leadership.

The Hands Off coalition, also backed by the National Association of Manufacturers and several conservative groups, highlighted on its blog the split among House Democrats in a release titled “Did Someone Say ‘Bipartisan?’” National Cable & Telecommunications Association President Kyle McSlarrow confidently decreed that “the House has clearly stated a preference for telecom reform that allows the marketplace and not the government to pick winners and losers.”

But pro-neutrality lobbyists insist that the Senate’s more deliberative nature will even the playing field in the coming weeks. Stevens has said he wants to pass his telecom bill by the July 4 recess, and a committee markup is planned for next week. Judiciary Committee Chairman Arlen Specter, who has hinted at plans for a Sensenbrenner-like push for jurisdiction over net neutrality, will take his first look at the issue in a hearing tomorrow.

“To be fair, the real grassroots push is only a month or six weeks old,” said Gigi Sohn, president of Public Knowledge. “It takes time for a buzz to start to grow.”

The Washington Post editorial board, which may influence Democrats, yesterday urged senators to refrain from regulating the Internet and argued that a lack of strong net-neutrality rules would not significantly affect consumers.