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## Internet Wars: A Who's Who Guide

October 7, 2010  
 by [Steve Norton](#)



Back in the day, there were no protesters outside corporate headquarters in Silicon Valley, no one had a position on net neutrality because no one knew what it was, and technology journalists were breathlessly trying to keep pace with new technologies and companies instead of holding forth on civil rights and liberties or network engineering protocols.

But ten or 15 years in the life of the Internet is a long time. The Internet is the transformative phenomenon of our time and its role in our lives raises serious questions about who the Internet “belongs” to, whether it is used for good or ill, what are its technological limits, and what role government has as arbiter of its future. The debates on these and other questions has become passionate and shrill, generating more heat than light at times. A person trying to follow the debate might need a field guide to sort through the wide array of groups and their philosophical or economic orientation. Allow me to offer up this breakdown, the details of which are spelled out in “[Who's Who in Internet Politics: A Taxonomy of Information Technology Policy](#),” a new report from the [Information Technology and Innovation Foundation](#).

In the report, ITIF lays out the following eight categories:

**Cyber-Libertarians** – Think of them as the original “netizens” and purists who believe the Internet should be governed solely by its users that and “information wants to be free.” Privacy and piracy will take care of themselves by the individuals who make up the organic and living Internet and not by government. Groups include the Free Software Foundation and the Electronic Frontier Foundation

**Social Engineers** – Mostly liberal, they see a lot of good in the Internet as an education and communications tool but they worry about the “digital divide,” privacy, net neutrality, and a concentration of power by both government and major corporations. These issues could erode the Internet’s capacity to be a tool for good for all. Among groups are the Benton Foundation, Center for Democracy and Technology, Center for Digital Democracy, Civil Rights Forum on Communication Policy, Consumer Project on Technology, Electronic Privacy Information Center, Free Press, Media Access Project, and Public Knowledge, and scholars such as Columbia’s Tim Wu, MIT Media Laboratory’s David Reed, academics at Harvard’s Berkman Center (among them Larry Lessig and Yoichi Benkler).

**Free Marketers** – Unleash the entrepreneurs! This group views the digital revolution as the great third wave of economic innovation in human history and a dynamic and liberating force that the government should mostly keep out of it. Groups include the Cato Institute, the Mercatus Center, the Pacific Research Institute, the Phoenix Center, the Progress & Freedom Foundation, and the Technology Policy Institute.

**Moderates** – Unabashedly pro-IT, they see the Internet as this era’s driving force for both economic growth and social progress and they believe a light touch from government is useful in helping the Internet reach its potential. “Do no harm” to limit to IT innovations but also “actively do good” is their mantra. Examples of moderates include the Center for Advanced Studies in Science and Technology Policy, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, ITIF, and the Stilwell Center.

**Moral Conservatives** – These groups see the Internet as an often smutty and dangerous place teeming with pornographers, gamblers, child molesters, terrorists that only government can keep at bay. They pushed for passage of the Communications Decency Act and Child Online Protection Act, Internet filtering in libraries, and worked to push legislation to ban online gambling. Examples are groups like the Christian Coalition and Focus on the Family, and around the world with countries like Indonesia, Thailand, Saudi Arabia and other religiously conservative nations that seek to limit activity on the Internet.

**Old Economy Regulators** – This group believes the Internet should be regulated in the same way that government regulates everything else. Otherwise, you have chaos and inequities. Examples of this group include law enforcement officials seeking to limit use of encryption and other innovative technologies, veterans of the telecom regulatory wars that preceded the breakup of Ma Bell, legal analysts working for social engineering think tanks, as well as government officials seeking to impose restrictive regulatory frameworks on broadband.

**Tech Companies & Trade Associations** – Software and communications giants, Internet start-ups, and the groups that represent them, these tech interests tend to believe that regulation can be both advantageous and detrimental, depending on their particular business model. They also advocate policies that are good for the technology industry or the economy in general. Examples include IBM, AT&T, and Hewlett Packard, Cisco Systems and Microsoft, and recent phenomena in the market such as Google and Facebook, as well as trade associations like the Information Technology Industry Council and the Association for Competitive Technology. They delve into trade, tax, regulatory, and other public policy issues from a bottom-line perspective rather than a philosophical basis.

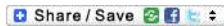
Bricks-and-Mortars – This group includes the companies, professional groups, and unions that use the Internet but also see it eroding the old-economy and face-to-face business transactions and they struggle to hold back the tide. These include both producers and distributors and middlemen (such as retailers, car dealers, wine wholesalers, pharmacies, optometrists, real estate agents, or unions representing workers in these industries). The long running battle over taxing Internet sales illustrates their struggle.

Of course, individual groups defy rigid characterization. For example, Moral Conservatives might find themselves on the same side of an issue as Social Engineers. Also, consensus is often elusive in trade associations as member companies often have complicated interrelationships or niches in the market. However, whether you lean more toward advancing the interests of the individual or society as whole, see government regulation as generally useful or harmful, or are wary of the Internet's influence or enthusiastic about it is useful to understanding where various groups stand. You might need Venn diagrams to fully understand the Internet policy landscape when surveying issues such as piracy, net neutrality, intellectual property rights, and Internet sales taxes. (An unusual pursuit, to be sure.)

One common theme in all these groups is that they almost certainly believe they are advocating sound policies and doing the right thing for individuals and for society – as incomprehensible as that might seem to those from an opposing organization. In some cases, their passion for their beliefs makes for a good sound bite in a news story. The societal destruction by a government that is scheming to implant chips in our heads is an easier story to sell than an explanation of how packets are sorted on broadband networks. And this is dangerous.

Internet and technology debate is being politicized and degraded. And misguided and ill-informed debates lead to misguided and ill-informed policies. We have enough of people vehemently opposing bills they haven't read or crafting policy from bumper stickers and making caricatures of opponents. The Internet's transformation is really just beginning so people in government, the media, and the public at large need to refine and update their understanding of the philosophical issues, the players, the economic realities, and societal issues as stake. Wherever you come down on a range of tech policies – whether you carry placards outside of Facebook's offices or decide to get an engineering degree to figure out net neutrality – it is essential to understand the political and policy landscape that didn't exist just 20 years ago. And now you have a map.

Photo credit: [Stefan](#)



Tags: [arbiter](#), [Association for Competitive Technology](#), [AT&T](#), [Benton Foundation](#), [Bricks-and-Mortars](#), [car dealers](#), [Cato Institute](#), [Center for Advanced Studies in Science and Technology Policy](#), [Center for Democracy and Technology](#), [Center for Digital Democracy](#), [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#), [child molesters](#), [Christian Coalition](#), [Cisco Systems](#), [civil rights](#), [Civil Rights Forum on Communication Policy](#), [Columbia](#), [Communications Decency Act and Child Online Protection Act](#), [communications tool](#), [Consumer Project on Technology](#), [Cyber-Libertarians](#), [dangerous](#), [David Reed](#), [digital divide](#), [digital revolution](#), [distributors](#), [economic growth](#), [economic innovation](#), [Electronic Privacy Information Center](#), [entrepreneurs](#), [Facebook](#), [Focus on the Family](#), [Free Marketers](#), [Free Press](#), [Free Software Foundation](#), [gamblers](#), [Google](#), [Harvard's Berkman Center](#), [Helweg Packard](#), [IBM](#), [ill-informed policies](#), [Information Technology & Innovation Foundation](#), [Information Technology and Innovation Foundation](#), [Information Technology Industry Council](#), [intellectual property rights](#), [Internet](#), [Internet filtering in libraries](#), [Internet start-ups](#), [Internet's transformation](#), [ITIF](#), [Larry Lessig](#), [liberties](#), [Ma Bell](#), [Media Access Project](#), [Mercatus Center](#), [Microsoft](#), [middlemen](#), [MIT Media Laboratory](#), [moderates](#), [Moral Conservatives](#), [ndonesia](#), [net neutrality](#), [netizens](#), [network engineering protocols](#), [Old Economy Regulators](#), [optometrists](#), [Pacific Research Institute](#), [pharmacies](#), [Phoenix Center](#), [piracy](#), [pornographers](#), [privacy](#), [pro-IT](#), [producers](#), [Progress & Freedom Foundation](#), [Public Knowledge](#), [real estate agents](#), [regulatory public policy](#), [retailers](#), [Saudi Arabia](#), [science and technology](#), [Silicon Valley](#), [smutty](#), [Social Engineers](#), [social progress](#), [societal destruction](#), [Software](#), [Stilwell Center](#), [tax](#), [taxing Internet sales](#), [Tech Companies](#), [technological limits](#), [technology industry](#), [technology journalists](#), [Technology Policy Institute](#), [telecom regulatory wars](#), [terrorists](#), [Thailand](#), [the Electronic Frontier Foundation](#), [Tim Wu](#), [Trade](#), [Trade Associations](#), [unions representing workers](#), [wine wholesalers](#), [Yochai Benkler](#), ["Who's Who in Internet Politics: A Taxonomy of Information Technology Policy"](#)

This entry was posted on Thursday, October 7th, 2010 at 6:18 am and is filed under [A New Framework for Growth and Equity](#), [Daily Fix](#), [Issues](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. You can [leave a response](#), or [trackback](#) from your own site.

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