



Ron Paul group launches campaign against Internet regulation

Manifesto is silent on the dangers copyright abuses pose to Internet freedom.

by [Timothy B. Lee](#) - July 5 2012, 5:25pm EDT

The Campaign for Liberty, a libertarian advocacy group founded by congressman and presidential candidate Ron Paul (R-TX), is gearing up for an "Internet freedom" project that focuses on opposing government regulation of the Internet.

A draft of the project's manifesto was first [leaked by BuzzFeed](#). It warns that "collectivist special interests" are pushing for harmful Internet legislation.

According to "Internet collectivists," the document says, "'Net neutrality' means government acting as arbiter and enforcer of what it deems to be neutral." The document criticizes antitrust regulation of successful Internet companies and government micromanagement of everything from the electromagnetic spectrum to tech companies' privacy practices.

Libertarians for the public domain

It's not surprising that a libertarian activist organization would denounce government regulation of the high-tech economy. But we were surprised to see the document denounce the "Internet collectivist" view that "what is considered to be in the public domain should be greatly expanded."

We don't see anything "collectivist" about expanding the public domain. Due to repeated extensions by Congress, copyrighted works from the 1920s are still under copyright protection, a situation that has drawn criticism from across the political spectrum. Indeed, a constitutional challenge to Congress's 1998 extension of copyright terms enjoyed the support of the [libertarian Cato Institute](#) and Nobel prize-winning economists such as [Milton Friedman, Ronald Coase, and James Buchanan](#).

In a Thursday interview, Campaign for Liberty spokesman Matt Hawes assured Ars that the organization did not intend to endorse today's long copyright terms. "We think the public domain is a terrific part of the Internet," he told us. Rather, he said, the group was worried that "Internet collectivists" would use the phrase "public domain" as "code for getting the government more involved" in copyright issues.

Still, it would be nice for the organization to take a clearer stance *against* Hollywood-backed copyright legislation that threatens Internet freedom. Ron Paul was an [early SOPA opponent](#), but SOPA is hardly the only example of bad copyright legislation. For example, Congress last added 20 years to copyright terms in 1998. That means we're due for another debate on extending copyright terms between now and 2018. Opponents of that inevitable proposal could use the Campaign for Liberty's support.

More importantly, Congress has already enacted copyright legislation that threatens Internet freedom. Perhaps the most alarming example is the 2008 PRO-IP Act, which gives the federal government the power to [seize domain names](#), servers, and other assets of Internet companies without proving their owners have committed any crime. Libertarians have long [railed](#) against the abuse of civil asset forfeiture laws in the war on drugs. There's even more reason to be alarmed about the government using those powers to enforce copyright laws.

A big tent

It's important to remember that the debate over Internet freedom is not strictly a left-vs-right debate. While the left and right are never going to agree on every Internet policy issue, they've frequently found common ground when Internet freedom comes under attack.

In particular, we don't agree with the manifesto's claim that "openness" is an "Internet collectivist" code word for "government control of privately owned infrastructure." Openness is an engineering concept that is embraced by people with a wide variety of political perspectives. There are reasonable arguments against openness being *mandated by the government*, but there's no reason libertarians should be hostile toward openness as such.

Protecting Internet freedom in the future will require the same kind of ideologically diverse coalition that stopped the Stop Online Piracy Act. Branding left-of-center Internet policy advocates as "Internet collectivists" seems unnecessarily divisive.

