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'Secret' telecom anti-Net neutrality plan isn't

by [Declan McCullagh](#)

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The Center for American Progress seemed to have blockbuster news on Tuesday: an expose titled "Telecoms' Secret Plan To Attack Net Neutrality."

On its Think Progress blog, the liberal advocacy group **announced** it had "obtained" a PowerPoint document "which reveals how the telecom industry is orchestrating the latest campaign against Net neutrality" through a pseudo-grassroots effort. The story was echoed on [Slashdot](#), Boing Boing, and innumerable pro-regulation blogs.

There's just one problem with Think Progress' claim: It's not, well, accurate.

In a case of truth being stranger than astroturf, it turns out that the PowerPoint document was prepared as a class project for a competition in Florida last month. It cost the six students a grand total of \$173.95, including \$18 for clip art.

The "No Net Brutality" campaign idea was one of the four finalists created as an assignment for a two-and-a-half week "think tank MBA" program. The other finalists were a project promoting free speech in Venezuela, one supporting education reform in Poland, and one dealing with sales taxes rates in Washington, D.C. ("No Net Brutality" came in third. The Polish reform idea won.)

Not only was the PowerPoint document presentation no secret, but it was **posted publicly** on the competition's blog, along with an **audio recording** of the event in Miami where the student contestants presented their ideas to the judges.

The competition was organized by the Atlas Economic Research Foundation, a non-profit, free-market group that spends millions of dollars a year supporting regional think tanks in other countries, especially those where the rule of law or protection of

individual rights may be impaired. Some examples include the Imani Center for Policy and Education in Ghana, the Fundacion Global in Argentina, and the Cathay Institute for Public Affairs in China.

"The Think Progress article is hilarious," David MacLean, the Canadian member of the six-person student team from four different continents, told CNET on Wednesday. "We've had a really good laugh in the last day over this. This is one of the funniest things I've ever seen."

MacLean added: "It was a class project done at the Atlas think tank MBA program. We came up with the concept in a few days." Part of Atlas' curriculum on how to manage think tanks required creating the campaign on a \$100 budget and "the goal was to make it launch," said MacLean, who lives in Alberta.

Neither Lee Fang, the author of the Think Progress article, or a spokesman for the Center for American Progress responded to repeated requests for comment.

Kristin McMurray, the American member of the team, said: "We have not had any contact with any telecom company during this campaign. The only funding we received was the \$100 given to us by Atlas." The campaign actually ended up costing the students money, since they chipped in some of their own cash, said McMurray, an editor at the [Sunshine Review](#), a non-partisan organization that pushes state and local governments to post more information online.

A [post](#) that appeared late Tuesday on the [NoNetBrutality.com](#) Web site says: "I'm sorry to dash all the conspiracy theorists hopes and dreams, but No Net Brutality is a bonafide concerned citizens initiative." The post said that the contestants spent all of \$173.95 on the idea, including printing and \$20 to register the .com and .org domain names.

The origin of "Net Brutality"

To brainstorm ideas and create proof of concept campaigns, the students attending the Atlas program split into multiple teams. Besides McMurray and MacLean, the other students assigned to the group that came up with the "NetBrutality" idea were Yolanda

Talavera (Nicaragua), Vincent De Roeck (Belgium), Huafang Li (China) and Aykhan Nasibli (Azerbaijan). Talavera's name appears in the PowerPoint document as its creator.

Their PowerPoint presentation sketches out suggestions for how to rally opposition to the Federal Communications Commission's move to **regulate** how broadband providers are allowed to manage their network.

Many conservatives and libertarians oppose the idea, arguing that the Internet has flourished precisely because it has been unregulated. FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski **has said** that new rules -- the agency's previous attempt was **tossed out** by a federal appeals court earlier this year -- are necessary to stop discriminatory activities by Internet providers.

The presentation shown at the Miami conference says: "Our agenda is to stop the government from taking over the Internet" by making the public aware of the "negative effects of this proposal." The students suggested targeting video game users and other potential allies through a **Twitter account**, a **Facebook page**, and a blog written in Chinese.

Because De Roeck, who runs a student group in Belgium, had a previous invitation to show up at a weekly meeting of conservatives convened by Americans for Tax Reform, he used his three minutes of allotted time as an opportunity to distribute a flyer about their "NetBrutality" idea. The Atlas students thought "maybe that would give us an edge over the competition," McLean said.

The concept of large corporations spreading their money around Washington to push for or block new laws is, of course, nothing new in political circles. A 2008 CNET **article** revealed how a secretive lobbying organization in Washington, D.C. called the **LawMedia Group**--hired by Comcast--did some or all of the writing for an anti-Net neutrality op-ed. An anti-Google campaign of dubious provenance that enlisted groups such as the American Corn Growers Association and the League of Rural Voters also was linked to LMG.

And it is an article of faith among broadband providers that Silicon Valley companies give millions to groups that support extensive Net neutrality regulations. Free Press

redacts the source of over \$3 million in contributions from pages 16 and 17 of its [financial disclosure statement](#), and Google, eBay, and Amazon.com [give money](#) to Public Knowledge.

"There are genuine concerns with how the network is managed," said [Jim Harper](#), director of information policy studies at the free-market [Cato Institute](#), who was not aware of the Atlas student competition until Wednesday. "There are genuine concerns with asking the FCC to do it. But groups that are obsessing themselves with the politics of it are diluting their own stories."

The phrase "Net Brutality" may have been first used three years ago when FreedomWorks chairman Dick Armey, now a prominent figure in the tea party movement, [assailed](#) a Maryland proposal that he said would not allow Internet service companies to charge different prices for different amounts of bandwidth.

But it wasn't a good enough slogan to win Atlas' student competition in Florida. "I still think in my mind, no disrespect to our competitors, that we had the best project," said MacLean, the Canadian team member.



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