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## Franken ratchets up rhetoric in war against corporate power



J. Scott Applewhite, Associated Press

Sen. Al Franken calls Net neutrality "the First Amendment issue of our time."

Net neutrality is the latest issue where he warns that control of the country's future is being hijacked by big business.

By **JEREMY HERB**, Star Tribune

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WASHINGTON - U.S. Sen. Al Franken sees a nation increasingly dominated by powerful corporations, and he doesn't like it.

The Comcast-NBC-Universal merger? Franken warns it's a step leading to conglomerates like "BP-Halliburton-Wal-Mart-Fox-Domino's Pizza."

The Supreme Court decision allowing corporations to support political candidates? "A fist on the scale" favoring big business over people, he says.

Now the Minnesota Democrat is redoubling his efforts to prevent what he sees as a corporate takeover of the Internet.

Calling it "the First Amendment issue of our time," Franken has become a leading advocate for Net neutrality, the idea that Internet providers should treat different Web traffic equally, regardless of content. It puts him in the center of a heated debate over whether corporations should be allowed to charge different prices for different content, effectively creating speedier "Lexus lanes" on the Internet for high-end content providers.


Broadband companies say Franken's approach would stifle their ability to innovate, hurting consumers, and accuse him of interfering with the First Amendment rights of companies.

While it may seem like a geeky debate, Net

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neutrality is just the latest in a series of battles Franken is fighting against corporate power.

In a season of anti-government fervor led by the Tea Party movement, Franken has championed the other end of the spectrum, insisting that government can be an agent of good to stop corporate abuses. As he does so, Franken is reverting to some of the fiery rhetoric that made him a darling of liberals before his election to the Senate.

The confrontation between Franken and his pro-business critics epitomizes the country's bitter divisions over competing Democratic and Republican economic agendas and views on the proper role of government.

Jim Harper, director of information policy studies at Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, said that government regulation has failed to guard against corporate abuse, and that competition is most effective at keeping corporations in line and spurring innovation.

"There's a fundamental misunderstanding on Sen. Franken's part and the community he's speaking to about how regulation works," Harper said.

Franken doesn't mince words in his criticism of corporate America. "If the Internet is under the control of corporate elites," he said, "democracy as we know it can't exist."

Bringing the Net neutrality fight to the Twin Cities last month, he spoke at a hearing with the FCC in Minneapolis, saying "the only thing corporations care about, the only thing they have the legal duty to promote, is their bottom line."

That followed his keynote speech at a liberal Netroots convention in Las Vegas, where he said the country has reached a "key generational struggle." More ominously, he warned the Netroots gathering: "We're at a dangerous moment in our history. ... We're more vulnerable to total corporate control of our lives than ever before."

Franken's backers believe Net neutrality is essential to a free Internet, arguing that government intervention is needed to prevent broadband providers from creating a pricing system that favors certain content.

But critics say Franken's assertion is off base, and they turn his First Amendment argument on its head.

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companies that they can't speak the way they want to, that's the First Amendment issue," said Jon Banks, a senior vice president at U.S. Telecom. The First Amendment, he said, is "a restriction on what the government can do."

## 'Not the public interest'

No Net neutrality legislation is likely to advance in Congress before the midterm elections. Franken has been almost alone in pressing the issue in the Senate, where he brought it up in his first week on the job.

Since then it has become one of a series of Franken initiatives aimed at curbing corporate power, starting with a controversial amendment to prevent defense contractors from forcing employees into binding arbitration of disputes. He proposed that measure after a defense contractor pressed an employee to submit to private arbitration of her allegations that she was raped by co-workers.

In the health care reform bill, Franken added the requirement that insurers spend 85 percent of premiums on health services.

At a February hearing on the proposed Comcast-NBC merger, Franken called executives liars and said that, having once

worked for NBC back in his "Saturday Night Live" days, he didn't trust their promises.

Franken also railed against the "activist" court of Chief Justice John Roberts, particularly after the decision that overturned restrictions on corporate spending in elections.

"How long do you think it will take for these monoliths to buy enough elections that they effectively have veto power over anything Congress tries to do to regulate them?" Franken said in a recent speech.

Despite the pattern, Franken told the Star Tribune he's not hostile to corporations, and he doesn't believe they are inherently evil. But corporations are designed to protect their own bottom lines, Franken said.

"Their interest is not the public interest," he said. "That's the role of the government."

Franken has only amplified his message in recent months as public sentiment has grown more angry with government.

Kay Wolsborn, a political science professor at College of St. Benedict and St. John's University, noted the contrast between Franken's message and the anti-government

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Tea Party talk that is getting much more attention.

In the current environment, Wolsborn said that Franken, not facing reelection until 2014, is able to take stands that other liberal colleagues cannot.

Republicans have often used Franken as a target while attacking liberal views. His political polar opposite in Minnesota, Rep. Michele Bachmann, has incorporated the senator into her stump speech.

"By the way, that's Franken country up in Minnesota," she said at her post-Glenn Beck rally last weekend in Washington. A chorus of boos rang out from the Tea Party crowd.

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